



Horizontal Evaluation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Transformation Initiative

July 2024

Horizontal Evaluation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Transformation Initiative

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Evaluation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Transformation Initiative

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List of acronyms

AHSOR - Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve Program

AHSUNC - Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities Program

CIRNAC - Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada

ELCC - Early Learning and Child Care

ESDC - Employment and Social Development Canada

FNICCI - First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative

HCD - Healthy Child Development

ISC - Indigenous Services Canada

PHAC - Public Health Agency Canada

QIP - Quality Improvement Projects

“The Initiative” - Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Transformation Initiative

“The Framework” - Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework

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Executive summary

The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Transformation Initiative (also referred to as “the Initiative”) aims to support the implementation of the co-developed Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Framework (also referred to as “the Framework”), which was jointly released in September 2018 by the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Métis National Council and the Government of Canada. The Framework sets out a shared vision, principles, and a path forward for Indigenous ELCC. This Framework also provides a guide for communities, program administrators, service providers, policy makers and governments to work in partnership towards achieving a shared vision that all Indigenous children can have the opportunity to experience high quality, culturally strong early learning and childcare.

This report presents the findings of the Phase 1 horizontal evaluation of the Initiative. It covers the period from fiscal year 2018 to 2019 through fiscal year 2022 to 2023. Over these years, the Initiative had actual expenditures of \$1.79 billion.

This evaluation used multiple lines of evidence to present its findings. It includes evidence on the Initiative’s:

- governance
- implementation, design, delivery, and
- early evidence of outcomes.

Key findings

Through its design and implementation, the Initiative has contributed to fostering Indigenous influence and decision-making for Indigenous ELCC programs and services.

While progress has been made in this area, there are additional opportunities for development that have not yet been realized. Nevertheless, this varies between and across distinctions, communities, and regions.

Identified contributing factors to Indigenous influence and decision-making included the increased flexibility within its horizontal Terms and Conditions and leveraging of legacy funding to produce greater horizontality across ELCC programs and services. These also included the ongoing development of partnership tables, and movement towards a distinction-based approach.

Identified challenges hindering Indigenous influence and decision-making included federal fiscal calendar and federal funding timelines that did not fully recognize the processes involved in effective engagement. These challenges do not include nor reflect the perspectives from off reserve, off territory and urban Indigenous communities. Other challenges found through the evaluation also included:

- partnership development and capacity building
- delays with funding
- insufficient funding amounts
- lack of transparency with the distinction-based federal funding formulas and allocation, and
- the effects of COVID-19.

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The evaluation gathered limited findings due to the lack of distinction specific performance information. However, some documented examples point to the Initiative having contributed to improving the quality, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC.

[The Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities \(AHSUNC\) evaluation](#) found strong evidence that the program is contributing to improvements in both the quality and cultural appropriateness of Indigenous ELCC.

[The Healthy Child Development \(HCD\) evaluation](#) found that the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR) program is supporting the development of a positive cultural identity and improved school readiness. It also found evidence of supports in developing the greater achievement of emotional and developmental milestones.

The HCD 2024 evaluation found that AHSOR programs are operating with a holistic approach to supporting child development including the integration of Nation-based culture and language activities. It also includes play-based learning, health promotion, nutritious food access, and involvement of parents. However, there is limited capacity to deliver effective programming due to poor infrastructure and stagnant funding against community changes (for example, population growth, increasing needs).

Specific examples from interviews with Indigenous partners and the document review point to the Initiative contributing to improvements in the areas of language preservation efforts and building confidence in participants' own cultures and identities. It also points to the cultural connectedness activities, culturally appropriate training for ELCC workers, and partnership and governance activities to coordinate and collaborate across organizations.

Of the 32 funded by Quality Improvement Projects (QIP) about one-third were completed while the remaining were nearing completion at the time of the evaluation. At this stage of the Initiative and given that majority of the QIP are near completion, there is limited information on the extent to which completed projects improved the quality or cultural appropriateness of Indigenous ELCC.

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on the delivery and accessibility of ELCC services in Indigenous communities.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been substantial for many Indigenous communities. It has disrupted many of the Indigenous-led planning and implementation activities. Moreover, families still required supports during child care centre closures. This also impacted the social and emotional development of children. There was a need to pivot and provide various supports including online activities, home-based kits, outdoor check-ins as well as food hampers.

The evaluation found that the Initiative is contributing to increased collaboration and coordination of federal Indigenous ELCC investments towards advancing the vision and priorities of Indigenous partners as outlined in the co-developed 2018 Indigenous ELCC Framework.

Various federal horizontal coordination mechanisms have been implemented. These include the Director General Interdepartmental Committee and a Federal Working Group on Reporting which meets monthly basis. While progress was identified, there remain areas for improvement including streamlining of funding for Indigenous ELCC.

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The 2024 HCD evaluation noted that the effectiveness of this Program (HCD) has increased over time with additional new Indigenous ELCC investments. These investments helped to address underinvestment, increase coverage, and expand program scope in community.

Observations

Given the formative scope of the report, this evaluation puts forward observations rather than recommendations. Putting forward observations provides the departments involved with implementing the Initiative and Indigenous partners with additional time and flexibility to consider potential actions. This is part of continued efforts to pursue the vision and implementation of the Initiative.

The 2 proposed observations stemming from the evaluation are as follows.

1: Ongoing work with Indigenous partners on performance measurement and data for the Initiative

The evaluation found that an interim performance measurement strategy is in place that includes 8 interim indicators. However, the evaluation found data collection and interpretation challenges on these indicators across all federal partners. These challenges were exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The evaluation also found that initial work has been undertaken by the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat to understand the current available data sources and potential baseline measures. It also includes the indicators that could be adapted or further developed. This is with the aim to participate in the co-development of distinction-based results frameworks with Indigenous partners. The current work undertaken points to the importance of working with Indigenous partners in the spirit of Reconciliation, in light of the differences across distinctions and building appropriate data collection infrastructure.

2: Considerations around streamlining the Initiative

One of the key objectives underlying the early implementation of the Initiative was improved federal coordination. This was seen as a first step to transferring full control of ELCC programs and services to Indigenous Peoples. This was facilitated through a number of strategies including the creation of horizontal Terms and Conditions for funding and the leveraging of existing legacy funding agreements. Based on perspectives from Indigenous partners¹, the evaluation found that improved federal coordination has contributed to fostering Indigenous influence over ELCC. However, the evaluation also found that federal changes have resulted in challenges in the areas of communication on roles and responsibilities of Indigenous and federal partners and in terms of the efficacy of collaboration efforts amongst them. In addition, the evidence from the evaluation noted issues around timeliness of funding allocations and decisions for Indigenous organizations. This has resulted in challenges in the delivery of ELCC services for some Indigenous organizations. This suggests that federal partners involved in the Initiative could explore measures to simplify and streamline internal processes and decision-making for all partners as it continues and progresses towards the vision of full transfer to Indigenous Peoples.

¹ This includes perspectives from First Nations, Métis, Inuit partners from National Indigenous Organizations and key informant interviewees.

Introduction

This report presents the findings from the evaluation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Transformation Initiative, referred to as “the Initiative”.

The Initiative aims to support the implementation of the co-developed Indigenous ELCC Framework, which was jointly released by the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Métis National Council and the Government of Canada in September 2018. The Framework sets out a shared vision, principles, and a path forward for Indigenous ELCC. This Framework also provides a guide for communities, program administrators, service providers, policy makers and governments to work in partnership towards achieving a shared vision. In particular, this is to ensure that all Indigenous children can have the opportunity to experience high-quality, culturally strong ELCC.

The Initiative is delivered through a Partnership Model between the Government of Canada and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partners. Under this model, Indigenous leadership are at the forefront of decision-making on funding allocations, work plans, and priorities for culturally based ELCC programming across Canada. Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) as the lead department, collaborates with its federal partners, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) to coordinate the delivery of investments in Indigenous ELCC in alignment with Indigenous leadership direction.

ESDC is the lead on the horizontal evaluation of the Initiative and has worked in close collaboration with other federal delivery partners. Each department (ESDC, ISC and PHAC) remains responsible for evaluating their respective Indigenous ELCC legacy programs. These legacy programs pre-date the Initiative. Specifically, ISC and PHAC are responsible for the Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR) and the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC), respectively. ESDC was responsible for evaluating the FNICCI, which was a sub-component of the ASET Strategy (currently the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET) Program). Since the inception of the Initiative, this sub-component has been moved under the Initiative. The evaluation plan for the Initiative includes 2 phases:

- a Phase 1 evaluation that gathers evidence on the Initiative’s governance, implementation, design and delivery and early evidence of outcomes. It covers fiscal years 2018 to 2019 through 2022 to 2023 inclusively, and
- a Phase 2 evaluation that will focus on longer-term outcomes of the investments under the Initiative and progress against the Indigenous ELCC framework. This is planned to be completed by fiscal year 2027 to 2028.

This report presents the results from the Phase 1 evaluation, in compliance with the *Financial Administration Act* and the 2016 Policy on Results.

Background

Historical context on ELCC

Provinces and territories have the primary responsibility for the design and delivery of ELCC systems. This includes the design and delivery of ELCC in Indigenous communities. In the 1990s, the Government of Canada established Indigenous ELCC programs to respond to the needs of regions and communities. It targeted First Nations and Inuit populations that had limited access to ELCC.

The Initiative builds on 3 federal “legacy” programs, delivered by a different federal department:

- the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI), administered by ESDC, was established in 1995 to support First Nations on reserve and Inuit in Northern communities to deliver quality child care services. This Initiative has an ongoing annual budget of \$55 million. As of 2019, FNICCI funds full-time child care for children up to age 12 in First Nations and Inuit communities. Initially this funding was part of the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program, formerly known as the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy. Since the inception of the Initiative, FNICCI has been moved under the Initiative
- the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) Program established in 1995 funds half-day Head Start in urban and northern communities. This Program has an annual ongoing budget of \$29.1 million. As of 2019, AHSUNC is delivered by PHAC. It is based on a grass roots, bottom-up approach, where the sites and communities have control over the design to best reflect their local culture and needs for children aged 0 to 6, and
- the Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR) Program administered by ISC supports the healthy growth and development of First Nations children living on reserve from age 0 to 6 through programming and services designed and delivered by communities. The programming is typically half day and can be delivered in a centre-based environment, through outreach services or home visits. AHSOR was established in 1998 with an annual ongoing budget of \$41.5 million.

Initiative’s resources

Budget 2017 announced an allocation of \$7.5 billion over 11 years, starting in 2017 to 2018, to support more accessible and affordable ELCC across the country.

Of this \$7.5 billion, \$1.75 billion over 10 years (between 2018 to 2019 and 2027 to 2028) was committed to advance the goals of the Framework. These investments led to the establishment of distinctions-based envelopes for new investments into Programs and Services, Partnerships and Governance and the Transformative Action Fund funding streams, as well as an envelope of funding for Quality Improvement Projects. The distinctions-based funding streams which together represent the bulk of investments under the Initiative, are jointly managed by First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners and the Government of Canada through the Partnership Model.

Distinctions-based allocation methodology

The allocation of the distinctions-based envelopes across First Nations, Inuit and Métis is based on a population formula of children aged 0 to 6 years old, using a per capita approach. The formula relies on the Census 2016 as the source of data that is comparable between the 3 distinctions groups.

Specifically, the population figures were determined as follows:

- the First Nations envelope per capita allocation is based on all First Nations children aged 0 to 6 regardless of residence (that is, on reserve and off reserve)
- the Métis envelope per capita allocation was based on all Métis children aged 0 to 6 residing in the Métis homeland (Ontario westward to BC and the NWT) who identify as Métis, and
- the Inuit envelope per capita allocation was based on all Inuit children aged 0 to 6 residing in the 4 self-governing Inuit regions.

This approach was developed by the Government of Canada and National Indigenous Organizations and has been in place since 2018. The Census provides in-depth information that:

- portrays all population segments at the same moment in time
- reflects age 0 to 6 (major demand population)
- includes all self-identifying Indigenous peoples, regardless of place of residence
- is consistent with other Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), and Government of Canada policies and programs.

In addition to the per capita calculation Metis Nation funding was supplemented to include a start-up fund recognizing that legacy ELCC was not broadly available for Métis children and families. A remoteness factor was also included to supplement funding for Inuit. Further, beginning in year 5 (2022 to 2023) the Transformative Action Fund was introduced for all distinctions, which represents an additional \$5 million per year to enable strategic investments in support of sector transformation.

Budget 2017 investments were allocated across envelopes and funding streams as follows:

- \$1.581 billion over 10 years, beginning in 2018 to 2019, for First Nations, Inuit and Métis Distinctions-Based Envelopes for Programs and Services. A minimum of 10% of the Programs and Services funding was earmarked for investments in Partnership and Governance
- \$ 34 million over 10 years in additional investments in AHSUNC, beginning in 2018 to 2019
- \$ 44 million over ten years, beginning in 2018 to 2019, for Quality Improvement Projects, and
- \$ 46 million over 10 years, beginning in 2018 to 2020, to establish the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat within ESDC and support the horizontal implementation of the Initiative across participating departments.

Following the Budget 2017 investments and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, a one-time emergency investment of \$120 million in 2020 to 2021 was made to help Indigenous partners respond to COVID-19 public health measures and safely operate during the pandemic. In particular:

- \$71 million to the First Nations Distinctions-Based Envelope
- \$10.9 million to the Inuit Distinctions-Based Envelope
- \$29.8 million to the Métis Nation Distinctions-Based Envelope, and
- \$8.21 million to the AHSUNC program.

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Soon after the roll-out of emergency funding for the pandemic, the Government of Canada's September 2020 Speech from the Throne proposed the creation of a Canada-wide ELCC system in partnership with provinces, territories, and Indigenous peoples. The 2020 Fall Economic Statement and Budget 2021 announced significant incremental investments to advance Indigenous priorities and participation in the design of the Canada-wide ELCC system. The 2020 Fall Economic Statement announced \$145 million over 5 years beginning in 2021 to 2022 and \$225 million ongoing for Indigenous ELCC.

The 2020 Fall Economic Statement also made the funding for Indigenous ELCC under Budget 2017 permanent and ongoing. Budget 2021 announced further investments of \$2.5 billion over 5 years beginning in 2021-2022 and \$542 million ongoing for Indigenous ELCC, including new streams of funding for Indigenous ELCC infrastructure². Budget 2021 also announced a 3% annual increase for all new and existing Indigenous ELCC investments starting in 2027 to 2028.

Annexes B, C and D further describe the funding streams and provide more details on planned spendings and allocations.

Tables 1A, 1B, 1C and 1D highlight the actual expenditures from legacy and new streams of funding from the Initiative. A total of \$1.79 billion was spent from 2018 to 2019 through 2022 to 2023 with annual expenditure increasing from \$242 million in fiscal year 2018 to 2019 to about \$720 million in 2022 to 2023.

Table 1A: Indigenous ELCC Actual Spending (\$million) for Legacy Programs^{3,4}

Source	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
Total	141.9	111.3	111.3	110.2	111.5	586.2
ESDC	73.6 ⁵	53.6 ⁶	55.0	54.0	52.6	288.8
PHAC	29.4	28.1	30.6	30.4	29.7	148.2
ISC	38.9	29.6	25.7	25.8	26.1	146.1
CIRNAC	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	3.1	3.1

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC, Indigenous Services Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada and Departmental Results Reports (2018 to 2022).

Notes: 1: CIRNAC does not receive direct funding allocations but became a signatory to the Terms and Conditions in 2022, such that they are able to facilitate the distribution of funding in accordance with Indigenous direction.

² The Infrastructure investments included \$264 million, over 4 years, beginning in 2022 to 2023 and \$24 million ongoing for urgent repairs and renovations and \$420 million over 3 years, beginning in 2023 to 2024 and \$21 million ongoing for Major Infrastructure. This funding was later reprofiled in budget 2023 to extend the initial investment over 4 years.

³ Please note that the sum of individual cells may not add up to the totals due to rounding.

⁴ See Annex F and G for more information on actual expenditures for AHSUNC and AHSOR programs.

⁵ Note that this amount includes FNICCI as well as Indigenous ELCC funding expended by First Nations and Inuit through Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy/Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program agreements in 2018 to 2019. It does not include funding expended through an Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy/Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program agreement with an Indigenous partner in Quebec.

⁶ Note that this amount includes FNICCI as well as Indigenous ELCC funding expended by First Nations and Inuit through Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy/Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program agreements in 2019 to 2020. It does not include funding expended through an Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy/Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program agreement with an Indigenous partner in Quebec.

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Table 1B: Indigenous ELCC Actual Spending (\$million) for New Investments ⁷

Source	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
Total	100.2	134.0	141.5	99.7	609.3	1,084.7
ESDC	28.80	68.83	79.71	23.5	181.3	382.1
PHAC	2.0	5.0	4.6	3.4	23.3	38.3
ISC	69.4	60.2	57.2	72.8	315.9	575.5
CIRNAC ^B	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	88.8	88.8

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC, Indigenous Services Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada and Departmental Results Reports (2018 to 2022)

Notes:

1: CIRNAC does not receive direct funding allocations but became a signatory to the Terms and Conditions in 2022, such that they are able to facilitate the distribution of funding in accordance with Indigenous direction.

2: New Investments refer to amounts expended under Budget 2017, the 2020 Fall Economic Statement and Budget 2021 by fiscal year. Infrastructure investments announced under Budget 2021 began in 2022 to 2023 for urgent repairs and renovations (\$80 million in 2022 to 2023 of \$264 million announced), while Major Infrastructure commitments in Budget 2021 (\$420 million) began only in 2023 to 2024.

Table 1C: Indigenous ELCC Actual Spending (\$million) on COVID-19 emergency funds⁸

Source	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
Total	not applicable	not applicable	120.1	not applicable	not applicable	120.1
ESDC	not applicable	not applicable	63.7	not applicable	not applicable	63.7
PHAC	not applicable	not applicable	8.2	not applicable	not applicable	8.2
ISC	not applicable	not applicable	48.1	not applicable	not applicable	48.1

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC, Indigenous Services Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada and Departmental Results Reports (2018-2022)

Table 1D: Indigenous ELCC Actual Spending (\$million) total from all departments⁹

Source	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
TOTAL	242.1	245.3	372.9	209.9	720.8	1,791.0

Note: The total presented in Table 1D represents the sum of the totals in tables 1A, 1B and 1C for each fiscal year.

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC, Indigenous Services Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada and Departmental Results Reports (2018-2022)

Notes:

1: CIRNAC does not receive direct funding allocations but became a signatory to the Terms and Conditions in 2022, such that they are able to facilitate the distribution of funding in accordance with Indigenous direction.

⁷ Please note that the sum of individual cells may not add up to the totals due to rounding.

⁸ Please note that the sum of individual cells may not add up to the totals due to rounding.

⁹ Please note that the sum of individual cells may not add up to the totals due to rounding.

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Objectives of the Initiative

Throughout 2017, the Government of Canada undertook extensive engagement on ELCC with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people across Canada. Over 100 engagement sessions were held, reaching over 3,000 people, including service delivery organizations, program administrators, early childhood educators, healthcare workers, communities, Elders, and parents. The engagement outcomes highlighted the need for a more coherent and flexible approach for achieving improved access to high-quality, culturally based ELCC services.

This engagement with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people led to the release of the co-developed Framework in 2018. The Framework supports and guides the design, delivery, and governance of an Indigenous ELCC system that is anchored in self-determination, centred on children, and grounded in culture. The Framework recognizes the importance of a distinctions-based approach in ensuring that the rights, interests, and circumstances of First Nations, Inuit and Métis are “acknowledged, affirmed, and implemented”, and as such, includes distinct First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation Frameworks that represents broadly their respective visions, goals, and priorities.

The Indigenous ELCC Framework complements [the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care](#) released in June 2017 by federal, provincial, and territorial Ministers responsible for ELCC. To support implementation of the Indigenous ELCC Framework, the Initiative aims to deliver on the following key objectives:

- support greater Indigenous influence and control over Indigenous ELCC programs and services
- improve the quality and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC with an emphasis on cultural and language content
- support a more holistic and integrated system of quality ELCC services for Indigenous peoples, and
- improve federal horizontal coordination as a first step towards transfer of Indigenous ELCC services to Indigenous authorities, with the end goal of transferring Indigenous ELCC to Indigenous control.

The Initiative aims to support the Government of Canada’s commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and supports the Government of Canada’s response to the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action](#) for federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Indigenous families. The Initiative is in alignment with Canada’s commitment to reconciliation, and to implementing the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) principles. It also respects Government of Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples through a renewed, nation-to-nation, government-to-government, and Inuit-Crown relationship. This is based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership as the foundation for transformative change. The Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative supports the Government of Canada’s goals of helping Indigenous children get the best start in life, offering increased support to families, and to investing in ELCC programs for Indigenous children.

This co-developed Framework reflects the unique cultures and priorities of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and their families. It serves as a guide for all partners and parties in the Indigenous ELCC sphere to work towards achieving the shared and co-developed vision of:

“First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and families as happy and safe, imbued with a strong cultural identity. It sees children and families supported by a comprehensive and coordinated

system of ELCC policies, programs and services that are led by Indigenous peoples, rooted in Indigenous knowledge, cultures and languages, and supported by strong partnerships of holistic, accessible, and flexible programming that is inclusive of the needs and aspirations of Indigenous children and families.” – Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework.

How the Initiative works

The Initiative is governed by a single set of horizontal Terms and Conditions which established a horizontal mechanism for the coordination of Government investments in Indigenous ELCC and set out the policy and criteria for the administration of funding under the Initiative. The delivery model for Indigenous ELCC funding under the Initiative varies based on the envelopes and funding streams.

As outlined by the [Terms and Conditions](#) governing the Initiative, funding advanced under Indigenous ELCC Initiative provides financial support for activities to Indigenous governments, organizations and communities. Examples of eligible activities include:

- enabling self-determination, Indigenous control, and governance of Indigenous ELCC
- supporting early childhood education, early literacy and learning, and childcare services
- promoting physical and mental health and wellbeing, including nutrition and physical activity
- supporting parents or guardians and families in their role as primary and caregivers including, but not limited to their participation in education and the labour market
- reflecting and promoting Indigenous culture and language
- complementing community economic, educational, health and social development goals
- promoting improved outcomes for Indigenous children, families, and communities
- increasing capacity for Indigenous workforce communities or organizations mandated to lead or support the implementation of Indigenous ELCC
- supporting the development of professional capacity, including centres of excellence or networks, and
- strengthening data, research reporting and evaluation.

Terms and Conditions

The horizontal Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Transformation Initiative' Terms and Conditions established the horizontal mechanism for the coordination of Government of Canada support for Indigenous ELCC. It set out the authority and criteria for the administration of the various streams of funding under the Initiative. The flexibility and broad application to all funding streams support the implementation of the Framework by giving maximum flexibility for Indigenous partners. It permits a range of Indigenous ELCC activities that support implementing the Indigenous ELCC Framework.

The Terms and Conditions apply across the four federal departments who administer Indigenous ELCC funding provided under Budget 2017, the 2020 Fall Economic Statement and Budget 2021. Each of these departments can provide funding for Indigenous ELCC by using either the Terms and Conditions of the existing legacy programs under FNICCI, AHSOR and AHSUNC, or the horizontal Terms and Conditions.

The Terms and Conditions have undergone several updates since they were first created in 2018. Specifically, this is to offer additional clarity on eligible expenditures under the various investment streams that have been introduced in the first five years of the Initiative.

Partnership model

The implementation of the Framework and associated investments is supported by a partnership model comprised of national and regional partnership tables. Under this partnership model, Indigenous leadership make decisions on regional allocations, work plans and priorities for the use of funding prior to its dispersion.

Indigenous Leadership

In a **First Nations** context, recommendations are made by First Nations-in-Assembly, a component of the Assembly of First Nations, and there are a variety of different regional governing bodies across provinces and territories, for example, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs in Manitoba or l'Assemblée des Premières Nations – Québec et Labrador for Quebec and parts of Newfoundland and Labrador.

In an **Inuit context**, national decisions are made by the Board of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which includes the President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and 4 voting members from the four regional Inuit land claims organizations. Regional decisions are made by the four regional Inuit land claims organizations.

In a **Métis context**, the Métis National Council and its Governing Members, the Manitoba Métis Federation, the Métis Settlements General Council, and the Northwest Territory Métis Nation all play roles in allocation and regional decisions.

Note: The governance structures and processes of Indigenous governments are unique for each distinction and region and evolve over time. As noted elsewhere, national decisions may not apply where a bilateral relationship has been established with a Modern Treaty Holder or Self-Governing First Nation.

The national partnership tables, convened by the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Métis National Council have been established to provide strategic direction and to coordinate national discussions on Indigenous ELCC with membership nominated by leadership.

The national partnership tables determine the allocation of their distinction-based funding envelope and oversee Indigenous ELCC policies and programs.¹⁰ These tables also aim to support the efforts towards the co-developed results frameworks for the Indigenous ELCC Framework.

In addition to the 3 national partnership tables, approximately 60 regional partnership tables or bilateral relations with First Nations, Inuit, and the Métis partners exist to direct the funding allocations to support distinction based Indigenous ELCC priorities. These regional governing bodies make recommendations for leadership decisions on the allocation and work plans for the different streams of funding across communities within their region. In some regions, Modern Treaty Holders and Self-Governing First Nations collaborate with regional governing bodies on allocation and other decisions.

The majority of the Indigenous ELCC partnership tables are comprised of working groups of technicians who provide expertise, options, and recommendations to the elected Indigenous leaders and committees for decision. The national and regional Indigenous partnership tables vary

¹⁰ As noted in textbox, recommendations are made by First Nations-in-Assembly, a component of the Assembly of First Nations. However, this body does not take decisions.

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in format and process across regions and distinctions. Overall, Indigenous governments determine how the delivery of Indigenous ELCC funding should evolve to advance the vision of the Framework and the goal of full transfer in their respective jurisdiction.

Based on the planning, priorities and funding decisions made by Indigenous leaders, the role of federal partners is to implement their funding direction based on the horizontal Terms and Conditions. This allows federal partners to implement Indigenous leadership direction on funding allocations and work plans through amendments to existing agreements, the establishment of new funding agreements, or interdepartmental transfers.¹¹

Federal roles and responsibilities

Federal partners¹² are responsible for supporting Indigenous-led decision making. They are also responsible for advancing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis direction on Indigenous ELCC funding allocations to Indigenous governments and communities¹³. This Indigenous ELCC funding is advanced through grants and contributions agreements governed by the horizontal Terms and Conditions. ISC, ESDC and PHAC have specific funding allocations based on the federal funding commitments made in Budget 2017, the 2020 Fall Economic Statement and Budget 2021. CIRNAC does not receive direct funding allocations but became a signatory to the Terms and Conditions in 2022, such that they are able to facilitate the distribution of funding in accordance with Indigenous direction.

The oversight of this horizontal Initiative is provided through a collaborative governance structure between federal and Indigenous partners. To support the horizontal coordination and investment management undertaken by federal partners in conformity with Indigenous decisions, the federal governance structure of Initiative includes:

- an Assistant Deputy Minister Interdepartmental Steering Committee
- a Director General Interdepartmental Committee, and
- a Federal Working Group on Reporting.

The Assistant Deputy Minister Interdepartmental Steering Committee, chaired by Senior Assistant Deputy Minister of Strategic and Service Policy Branch, ESDC, is composed of Assistant Deputy Ministers from ESDC, ISC, PHAC, the Treasury Board Secretariat, and CIRNAC. The Assistant Deputy Minister Interdepartmental Steering Committee is responsible for the broad management of the Initiative. It also ensures strategic harmonization across programs and departments.

The Director General Interdepartmental Committee is comprised of Directors General and working-level officials from the 4 participating federal departments, as well as the Treasury Board Secretariat. The meetings of the Director General Interdepartmental Committee are chaired by the Director General of the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat at ESDC. The overall objective of the Indigenous ELCC Director General Interdepartmental Committee is to oversee the implementation of the Initiative, supported by the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat and Service Canada housed in

¹¹ A similar collaborative approach is followed for Indigenous ELCC investments in AHSUNC. Strategic priorities for this funding are informed by the National Aboriginal Head Start Council, which is the AHSUNC program's Indigenous led governance body. Direction on program delivery, implementation, and funding allocation is provided by the National Aboriginal Head Start Council.

¹² This refers to ESDC, ISC, CIRNAC and PHAC.

¹³ This Indigenous-led decision making is enabled by National and Regional Partnership Tables for Indigenous ELCC and by the National Aboriginal Head Start Steering Committee for AHSUNC.

ESDC. The Director General Interdepartmental Committee reports directly to the Assistant Deputy Minister Interdepartmental Steering Committee.

The Working group(s) focusing on relevant issues or subject matter (for example, Results Framework, Reporting, Funding and Financial) are developed and implemented on an as-needed basis. These working groups coordinate and manage the implementation of the Indigenous ELCC Initiative and are comprised of working-level officials (Directors, Managers, Officers or Analysts) from participating federal departments. Contextual factors for Initiative Implementation.

Evaluation context

During the period covered by the evaluation, the Initiative has been implemented within a relatively complex environment with multiple contextual factors requiring consideration.

Launch of a Canada-wide ELCC System

Canada first launched the Indigenous ELCC Initiative in 2018. Following this, in 2020 Canada announced its commitment to establish a Canada-wide ELCC system. This was developed in collaboration with Provinces and Territories and Indigenous partners. Building on these announcements, through Budget 2021, Canada made an investment of over \$30 billion over 5 years to build a Canada-wide ELCC system with Indigenous peoples, provinces and territories. The building of a Canada-wide ELCC system in which Indigenous distinctions-based priorities are to be reflected increased the scope, volume and complexity of work to support the implementation of the co-developed Indigenous ELCC Framework, endorsed by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis leadership alongside Canada in 2018. In addition, the delivery landscape for Indigenous ELCC investments varies by distinction, region, and years. According to internal respondents from the key informant interviews “this complex governance within and by distinction add to the complexities of implementation of Indigenous ELCC investment decisions”.

Need for greater collaboration and joint planning among provinces and territories and Indigenous partners

The Indigenous ELCC funding complements provincial and territorial funding and enables more equitable outcomes for Indigenous children who face barriers to access culturally appropriate, high-quality, and inclusive ELCC. The implementation of the Indigenous ELCC Initiative entailed additional time and governance resources so that Indigenous partners could work along-side Provinces and Territories and the federal government in building the system. The current state of Federal, Provincial, Territorial and-Indigenous relations varies across the country. Incremental efforts are underway in some jurisdictions through ELCC Implementation Committees (established by Provinces and Territories) and emerging distinctions specific Federal, Provincial, Territorial and Indigenous forums to broker relationships between Federal, Provincial, Territorial and Indigenous representatives on ELCC, to share and exchange information and to identify and collaborate on shared priorities¹⁴.

COVID-19 pandemic

¹⁴ There are multiple factors to account for the varying pace of progress in Federal-Provincial-Territorial-Indigenous (FPTI) collaboration on ELCC in each jurisdiction. Many Provinces and Territories have existing structures leveraged for collaboration/information sharing with Indigenous partners. There are however certain Provinces and Territories that are currently in the process of establishing these forums.

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The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been substantial for many Indigenous communities. The pandemic started in the middle of the 5-year period covered by this evaluation. It has severely disrupted many of the Indigenous-led planning and implementation activities. Moreover, child care centres were closed, and families still required supports. There was a need to pivot to provide various supports including online activities, home-based kits as well as food hampers. Therefore, the findings are contextualized according to these impacts on partnerships, organizations, projects, and communities. Specifically, these are through the narratives provided by Indigenous organizations.

Horizontal evaluation approach

A two-phased horizontal evaluation approach for the Initiative was approved by the Treasury Board Secretariat in 2018. ESDC is required to lead the horizontal evaluation of the Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative in collaboration with ISC and PHAC. The ESDC Evaluation Directorate developed the evaluation scope and questions, in collaboration with ISC and PHAC. Each department is responsible to conduct an evaluation of its own program that enable the allocation of funding. Specifically, FNICCI, which is currently part of the Indigenous ELCC Initiative and is being evaluated as part of this evaluation. PHAC is responsible for the evaluation of the AHSUNC program and ISC for the AHSOR program. Both ISC and PHAC have undertaken their own program evaluations. This evaluation report has leveraged the findings from these evaluations, where applicable.

Limited performance data

One limitation of the evaluation is that there is limited performance measurement data available at this stage of the Initiative.¹⁵

Upon the inception of the Initiative and to establish a baseline of Indigenous ELCC results, an interim set of indicators based on the AHSOR and AHSUNC legacy programs was put in place. This was to help address information gaps, while the reporting and distinction-based results frameworks are being co-developed.

The co-development of distinction-based results frameworks is currently underway for the Initiative. This work is undertaken by ESDC and Indigenous partners. The work is expected to be completed by March 2025. As outlined above, some work has been undertaken to develop and implement a preliminary set of interim indicators. These frameworks will help to better understand the baseline, and progress of investments against objectives as the Initiative continues. Given the early stages of this work, there is limited performance information or data available on baselines, outputs or early outcomes based on the interim indicators. Furthermore, there have been unforeseen delays and challenges while undertaking the co-development of the results framework due to the competing priorities and needs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for both Indigenous and federal partners.

Therefore, this Phase 1 evaluation has implemented a formative focus to inform considerations for the ongoing development, as the partners work together to co-develop results frameworks and an overall performance measurement strategy for the Initiative. Due to this ongoing effort related to the development of the results frameworks, the evaluation does not follow the traditional federal approach of assessing progress against outcomes as outlined in standard performance

¹⁵ Consult the section on Contributions to improvement in the quality, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC for more information on the performance data.

measurement tools¹⁶. Hence, the Phase 1 horizontal evaluation focuses on the design, delivery, and implementation of the Indigenous ELCC programs, and the extent to which federal coordination is facilitated through the Initiative.

It is anticipated that with the ongoing co-development work, the Phase 2 horizontal evaluation may benefit from greater availability of performance data and information guided by the eventual co-developed results frameworks.

Iterative co-development process for an Indigenous ELCC evaluation

Some early steps towards co-development with Indigenous partners for the evaluation were initiated during the Phase 1 evaluation, with the expectation that further progress will be achieved during the Phase 2 summative evaluation. This evaluation was shaped by the preliminary input and perspectives offered by Indigenous partners. Although there was limited input and perspectives of Indigenous partners in the planning and implementation phases of the Phase 1 evaluation, Indigenous co-development approaches and processes will be expanded in the Phase 2 summative evaluation.

The involvement of Indigenous partners to date for this Phase 1 evaluation has included:

- **Inuit:** Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has evaluated the implementation of the Inuit ELCC Framework within a similar timeframe as the Phase 1 horizontal evaluation. ESDC's Evaluation Directorate has worked with Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami since Fall 2021 to support co-development through regular meetings to align the respective evaluation activities. A meta-analysis of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's evaluation report findings was conducted. Findings of relevance from Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's evaluation report are integrated in specific sections throughout this evaluation report. The full Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami evaluation report is attached with permission from Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami in Annex H.
- **Métis:** 11 key informant interviews were completed with national and regional representatives from across the Métis Nation. However, uptake in participation was the highest amongst one regional organization. Métis partners provided their views, experiences, and relevant examples according to the three main evaluation questions and themes, and
- **First Nations:** 9 key informant interviews were completed with representatives from First Nations national and regional partners. In addition, the evaluation team received written responses from two First Nations representatives as well as the Assembly of First Nations who provided perspectives on the key evaluation issues. This accounted for a total of 11 responses from First Nations partners. First Nations partners provided their views, experiences, and relevant examples according to the 3 main evaluation questions and themes.

Co-development processes are inherently iterative and reflect joint engagement processes on both "what" the evaluation will explore as well as *how* the Government of Canada will work alongside Indigenous partners to advance this activity. A number of developments and competing priorities resulted in limited engagement and co-development on evaluation across all partnership tables over the past three years, including:

¹⁶ Performance measurement tools help establish a common understanding of the program's activities, products and services delivered, and the associated changes (that is, outcomes) via the development of a performance measurement story (or theory of change) and a logic model.

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- the pressures and competing priorities for Indigenous partners to respond to the increased and incremental Indigenous ELCC funding
- need to develop new and emerging Indigenous governance and capacity in the ELCC sector, and
- the continued need to manage impacts of COVID-19 at the community level – and the impact that the Pandemic had on engagement efforts, for all with respect to travel and other in-person engagement. The impact of COVID-19 was such that in-person meetings and virtual engagements with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Partnerships tables resumed only in late 2022.

Horizontal evaluation questions and approach

The following 3 overarching evaluation questions were used to guide the evaluation and the associated engagement with Indigenous partners¹⁷:

1. To what extent is the Transformation Initiative's partnership model implemented and operated in a way that fosters Indigenous influence and decision-making in the design and delivery of Indigenous ELCC programs and services?
2. How is the Transformation Initiative contributing to improvements in the quality, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC services for Indigenous families and communities?
3. To what extent has federal support for Indigenous ELCC been more coordinated since the inception of the Transformation Initiative?

The main lines of evidence used for this evaluation included:

- Literature and document review (including among others documented success stories, the Evaluation of the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities Program by PHAC and the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Inuit Early Learning and Child Care Framework by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami)¹⁸
- Review of available financial and administrative data
- Key informant interviews¹⁹ and written submissions which explored the early challenges and promising practices as well as results on the Initiative. Specifically:
 - Key informant interviews with internal with Government of Canada officials from the ESDC, PHAC, ISC, and CIRNAC (27 respondents), and
 - Key informant interviews external with Indigenous partners – Métis (11 interviews) and First Nations (9 interviews) partners²⁰. In addition, 2 additional representatives from First

¹⁷ See Annex E for more information on the evaluation questions and methodology.

¹⁸ This included previous evaluation final reports, literature, program documentation, success stories, workplans and project files provided by the program and the AHSUNC evaluation report. A total of approximately 60 documents were reviewed as part of this review.

¹⁹ A limitation is the imbalance between internal and external key informant interviews conducted. This could potentially impact and skew the overall findings.

²⁰ Note that these interviews included a combination of individual and group interviews.

Nations submitted written responses for a total of eleven responses from key informants. The Assembly of First Nations shared a written response for the evaluation documenting viewpoints and perspectives on key evaluation issues.²¹ Key informant interviews were not conducted with Inuit representatives to avoid duplication with the evaluation that Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami was undertaking in parallel on Inuit ELCC.

The analysis and reporting on the interviews consistently used the following scale to provide an indication of frequency of perspectives among the key informants responding to a specific issue:

- “a few” refers to less than one-quarter
- “some” refers to between one-quarter and one-half
- “many” refers to between one-half and three quarters, and
- “most” refers to three-quarters or greater.

Note that by relying largely on so few key informant interviews and written submissions, the evaluation has some limitations in its analysis for First Nations and Métis distinctions. Among the federal key informant interviews, some responses were limited to certain aspects of the program and its performance. Accordingly, efforts were made to interview a larger number of federal informants to gather a wider variety of perspectives. In addition, as a qualitative data collection method, the strength of key informant interviews is to provide additional details, explanations, interpretations, and contextualize program outcomes.

Due to the limited number of key informants, an analysis by region for the Indigenous distinction group was not possible. Hence, this evaluation is limited in its ability to capture the specific economic conditions, social support systems and the unique ELCC needs for Indigenous families and communities at the regional level.

Overall summary of key findings

This formative evaluation focused on the implementation of the Horizontal Initiative between the fiscal years 2018 to 2019 and 2022 to 2023. More specifically, it aimed to examine the extent to which the Initiative has:

- contributed to fostering Indigenous influence and decision-making for Indigenous ELCC programs and services
- contributed to improving quality, cultural appropriateness and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC, and
- contributed to better federal coordination for Indigenous ELCC.

²¹ The response is attributed to the perspectives that the Assembly of First Nations' National Expert Working Group members have shared, as well as Assembly of First Nations' own experience in collaborating with the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat on this Initiative; the Assembly of First Nations shared the perspectives that were raised by the National Expert Working Group and provided these as the chair of the National Expert Working Group.

Contribution to fostering Indigenous influence and decision-making for Indigenous ELCC

Summary of findings

The evaluation found evidence that the Initiative has contributed to fostering Indigenous influence and decision-making for Indigenous ELCC programs and services. With respect to governance, while some groups and regions are building on the established structures and roles within existing governance structure resulting from legacy program investments prior to the new investments under the Initiative, others are focusing on developing and implementing new partnerships and governance structures to coordinate and work collaboratively on Indigenous ELCC issues and programming. Most agree that this area continues to be a work in progress for the Initiative, with considerable variability between and across distinctions and regions. Additional effort is required to clarify roles and responsibilities, of federal partners within the federal governance structure and to continue development and reporting on workplans.

Characteristics of the Initiative fostering Indigenous influence and decision-making included the increased flexibility within its horizontal Terms and Conditions, leveraging of legacy funding to produce greater horizontality across ELCC programs and services, ongoing development of partnership tables, and movement towards a distinction-based approach.

Identified challenges hindering Indigenous influence and decision-making included federal fiscal calendar and federal funding timelines that did not fully recognize the processes involved in effective engagement. These challenges do not include nor reflect the perspectives from off reserve, off territory and urban Indigenous communities. Other challenges found through the evaluation also included: partnership development and capacity building, delays with funding, insufficient funding amounts and lack of transparency with the federal funding formulas or distinction-based allocation, and the effects of COVID-19.

Establishment of partnerships and workplans

The administrative data and documents reviewed as part of the evaluation contained multiple examples of partnerships among Indigenous and federal partners. These partnerships are either built from existing relationships from legacy programming or being established, because of the new investments being implemented under the Initiative.

Progress reports presented to the Director General Interdepartmental Committee indicated that the development of Indigenous partnerships has progressed through the establishment of both Indigenous ELCC national and regional Partnership Tables and bilateral relationships. As of 2023, more than 60 tables are in place which vary in format and process across regions and distinctions. National and regional Indigenous ELCC Partnership Tables with First Nations, Inuit and Métis have been established to support Indigenous-led decisions on funding allocations, workplans and priorities.

The 3 national partnership tables include:

- National Expert Working Group with First Nations which is mandated by First Nations in Assembly and coordinated by the Assembly of First Nations. The National Expert Working Group includes representatives from each regional First Nations ELCC governing bodies

and convenors that have been mandated by leadership, as well as other First Nations ELCC technicians²²

- Inuit National Partnership Table which is chaired by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and includes representatives from the Inuit Land Claim Organizations, 3 regional Inuit Associations from Nunavut and Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, and
- Métis National Council which is the National Indigenous organization representing the Métis Nation and the Métis National Council Governing Members.

In addition to these national tables, ESDC engages with government-to-government bilateral relationships with independent Indigenous governments (not members of the Métis National Council), including the Manitoba Métis Federation, the Northwest Territories Métis Nation, the Métis Settlements General Council, as well as other organizations such as the Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak. It also includes other Self Governing First Nations such as in the Yukon through CIRNAC's implementation tables. The National Aboriginal Head Start Council provides strategic direction for AHSUNC investments for pan-Indigenous programs and services.

The implementation of each national partnership table takes into account the differences in leadership and governance models, as well as decision-making approaches and timelines. For example, First Nations National Leadership decisions on regional allocation are typically made through resolutions passed by Chiefs-in-Assembly at bi-annual Assemblies and Special Chiefs Assemblies typically occurring in July and December. The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami is governed by the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami President and Board of Directors including elected representation (Presidents) of the 4 Inuit Land Claim Organizations as well as the presidents from the National Inuit Youth Council, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, and the Inuit Circumpolar Council (Canada). Although the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami annual meeting is typically held in the fall, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board meets regularly throughout the year, at which time resolutions can be adopted. The decision-making process with the Métis National Council typically involves collaboration and consultation among Métis Nation Governing Members. Major decisions are often made through consensus-building and discussion among representatives. Resolutions that guide future directions are approved at an Annual General Assembly typically held in the fall.

Before disbursing funding to Indigenous partners, the Director General Interdepartmental Committee²³ reviews and endorses the work plans and priorities advanced by Indigenous partners. The workplans describe the areas of focus for the communities' and organizations' use of Indigenous ELCC funding, and outline priorities for governance and partnerships as well as program or services funding. A total of 54 workplans²⁴ were presented and endorsed by the Director General Interdepartmental Committee between the fiscal years 2021 to 2022 through 2022 to 2023. It remains unclear from the documents available for the evaluation as to how these workplans were implemented. The workplans reviewed for the evaluation provide an overview of the partnerships established at the regional and national levels, and descriptions of planned activities and anticipated outcomes for addressing governance and decision-making issues.

²² Source: Research and development of First Nations-specific Results Framework and Evaluation Strategy for Early Learning and Child Care - Assembly of First Nations (afn.ca).

²³The DGIC reviews the Indigenous partners' annual or multi-year strategic plans for endorsement by all federal partners given the horizontal nature of the Initiative.

²⁴ Note that these include the workplans received and represent only a subset from all Indigenous partners.

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There are indications that the partnership model under Indigenous ELCC is in alignment with the existing program structures and associated goals of the Indigenous ELCC Framework. For example, in a Fall 2022 strategic planning overview, AHSUNC program representatives noted that the Initiative presents an opportunity to build alignment with the national or regional structure of Indigenous ELCC distinctions-based partnership tables. The planning overview noted that the Initiative could further help position the National Aboriginal Head Start Council and regional AHSUNC bodies as an established voice for the unique needs and interests of Indigenous children and families living off-reserve and in urban and northern communities. Within the context of the Initiative, PHAC will aim to support National Aboriginal Head Start Council and regions in achieving self-determination, while continuing to play an important role in supporting National Aboriginal Head Start Council and regional AHSUNC bodies' strategic planning.

Roles and responsibilities

Overall, there were different views and opinions regarding the current clarity of roles and responsibilities of Indigenous organizations, governments and other parties involved in Indigenous ELCC within the partnership model of the Initiative. Many of the partnerships have been and are continuing to evolve through the ongoing development and implementation of various Tables, agreements and workplans under the Initiative.

For instance, according to internal key informants, there was a consensus that strengthening the clarity around roles and responsibilities among federal partners was key to building effective partnerships among all parties involved in the Initiative. Internal respondents raised mixed opinions about the degree of clarity of roles and responsibilities across federal and Indigenous partners. It was noted by many internal respondents (18 out of 27) that improvements are needed to better understand and clarify the roles and responsibilities of federal and Indigenous organizations. A few internal respondents (2 out of 27) also noted that increased clarity is anticipated as the Initiative matures and capacity increases with new investments.

Some internal respondents (11 out of 27) noted that challenges regarding the clarity of role and responsibilities arose from the multiple channels of communication between the federal regions, National Headquarters and Indigenous partners. These multiple federal channels have sometimes resulted in confusion with respect to the key points of contact for Indigenous partners, as Regions and National Headquarters would at times communicate bilaterally to Indigenous partners.

Among Indigenous partners, the evaluation found a variety of perspectives and opinions on the roles and responsibilities of federal and Métis partners. Among Métis partners, some (5 out of 11) indicated that there was some level of clarity in partners' roles and responsibilities, but that it was an evolving area that was currently being worked on by the various partners. Some First Nations partners (4 out of 11) indicated that the partnerships and specifically the roles and responsibilities under the Initiative continue to be a work in progress and are evolving. The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Evaluation report also referred to the evolving nature of roles and responsibilities. In particular, it was noted that "the opportunity exists for the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group, as a national working group, to become more strategic and less operational, providing strategic recommendations to National Inuit Committee on Health and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board, and so advance upstream systems change. To do so, it is recommended that the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group focus primarily on advancing the goals and priorities expressed in the Inuit ELCC Framework, through specific actions at the national level, which will impact systems change" (Consult Annex H).

In addition, many internal respondents (15 out of 27) highlighted that further defining responsibilities among federal partners would assist in strengthening not only the collaboration among federal partners, but also with Indigenous partners. Other suggestions included greater

communication and engagement with Indigenous partners, and increased information sharing across all partners.

Promising practices on information sharing for the Initiative

Many Métis key informants (7 out of 11) indicated that sharing information about existing practices on ELCC could help further build partnerships across all Indigenous ELCC partners.

“...I knew nothing about Indigenous ELCC. When it started, I went to the experts [...]. Probably the smartest thing I ever did. Because ...we built a relationship right off the start.”

-Métis partner

A few First Nations partners (2 out of 11) indicated that engaging with community partners in all steps of decision making (such as policy development, research, advocacy, administration of funds, community development) helped identify priorities, needs and opportunities. Therefore, the partnerships and engagement with community partners strengthened programs and services. A few First Nations partners (2 out of 11) also stated that they benefited from building partnerships with other First Nations communities. Moreover, the First Nations partners stated they could share lessons learned and good practices related to ELCC.

“We just recently had our Métis ELCC conference, and it was a great way to bring people, early childhood educators, school like people interested in supporting children together [.....]. I think that was great and I felt that there was a lot of passion about learning about who Métis people are and by producing culture where I live in resources that can be used anywhere in the province, that means children are going to start to recognize themselves wherever they go in their classrooms”

-Métis partner

“[A key promising practice for our organization is the] meaningful engagement with our communities. [...] Providing continuous engagement opportunities for families, communities to tell us what their values are for children, what they want to see out of these programs, what they need, if they do have centers and really listening has enabled us to meet the needs as much as possible.”

-First Nations partner

“Involving our nations has really made a huge difference for us. I feel, you know, we came together the very first time with nobody knowing one another, even though we're all within [the same Treaty]. You know, a couple of nations might know one another, but now we go into different meetings, and everybody knows one another. We all know you know, where we're at. You know, we're all in the same boat trying to get things working the best we can.”

-First Nations partner

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's Inuit ELCC evaluation noted “the importance of preparedness and the need for agile responses to unexpected events, providing ideas for specific actions that could help to better respond to future crises” based on experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several promising practices were noted in the 2022 evaluation of the AHSUNC Program. In particular, the evaluation noted that the program supported opportunities for sites to actively share promising practices, ideas and resources through regional and national network meetings and training. The evaluation reported that this was achieved despite barriers for participation such as the lack of staff time and language differences.

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Additionally, the 2024 HCD evaluation which included the evaluation of the AHSOR program noted a range of promising practices in-line with Nation -based priorities and values. These included land-based learning activities, regular community engagement to define programs, bringing people together through group-based activities, grounding and revitalizing traditional ways of knowing (such as parenting, childbirth), and regularly involving Elders and Knowledge holders.

Initiative characteristics that foster Indigenous ELCC design and delivery

The evaluation found evidence of a number of design and implementation features that help foster Indigenous influence and decision-making.

Flexibility within the Terms and Conditions for funding – A review of the horizontal Terms and Conditions suggests that the Initiative aims to prioritize self-determination through Indigenous-led decision making with respect to the development and implementation of ELCC plans, including decisions regarding funding allocations. It also seeks to fund a broad range of activities for funding recipients aid in the design, development, delivery, and management of culturally appropriate ELCC services and programming.

“The Terms and Conditions are fairly broad and allow [Indigenous partners] the ability to spend the money towards the priorities that they see with respect to childcare” – **internal respondent**

According to a few internal respondents (6 out of 27) and some Métis (5 out of 11) and First Nations partners (3 out of 11), the flexibility in the Initiative’s Terms and Conditions supported Indigenous influence and decision-making. *The perspective of the Métis partners varied in terms of how the program flexibilities supported the delivery – while some indicated that it provided a great deal of support, others indicated it generated a lack of clarity in terms of federal government expectations causing confusion among Indigenous partners. Among the First Nations partners, there was also a mixed response regarding flexibilities. While a few (2 out of 11) reported that the Terms and Conditions were not sufficiently flexible, some (5 out of 11) partners indicated that the Initiative supports the needs of First Nations communities as it recognizes this distinction’s autonomy in regard to ELCC. Within the Terms and Conditions, decisions are taken “by the First Nations and for the First Nations”. The Assembly of First Nations written submission noted that the horizontal Terms and Conditions between three federal departments has allowed First Nations to bring together their funding and work towards a less siloed approach to ELCC. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s Inuit ELCC evaluation noted that “the flexibility of the Inuit ELCC Framework has enabled Inuit to design, deliver and invest in solutions that respond to their needs and priorities. This also provides the opportunity for Inuit and Canada to implement solutions to address operational issues, such as governance and accountability, prior to full transfer of ELCC.” (Consult Annex H)*

A review of a sample of Indigenous ELCC workplans illustrated a wide diversity of planned initiatives. Examples of activities and initiatives in these areas include governance, partnership development, research and evaluation, needs assessment, curriculum development, program implementation, culture and language activities, individual or family supports, mental health, nutrition, transportation, infrastructure development, professional development, as well as community health and support.

Leveraging existing legacy funding agreements to support greater horizontality – By using a horizontal initiative and managing extensive existing legacy programming agreements, federal partners found it easier to coordinate and allocate funding based on Indigenous-identified priorities across various departments and programs. Some internal respondents (7 out of 27) highlighted that the flexibility under the Initiative enabled them to leverage the existing legacy

FNICCI, AHSOR and AHSUNC funding agreements to support various additional aspects of Indigenous ELCC delivery. For example, ESDC's legacy FNICCI program was launched originally in 1995 to support First Nations and Inuit communities' access to quality child care services. The FNICCI program supported First Nations and Inuit parents who were starting a new job or participating in a training program with accessible childcare. With FNICCI moving under the broader Indigenous ELCC umbrella and sharing horizontal Terms and Conditions, it complements the other programs and Initiative. Hence it increases the program's flexibility and consistency in supporting First Nations and Inuit families to access child care. Similarly, an evaluation of the AHSUNC completed in 2022, noted that funding through the Initiative provides an opportunity to assist in addressing some longstanding AHSUNC operational needs.

The ongoing development of National and Regional Tables for Indigenous ELCC - The development of National and Regional Tables is ongoing. However, the Tables were recognized in interviews as a key facilitator in supporting Indigenous influence and decision-making even with some of the challenges encountered in their development (consult below). Many internal respondents (20 out of 27) reported some positive aspects of the design and implementation of the Tables and steering committees. **The written submission from the Assembly of First Nations noted that the partnership model and decentralization of decision-making under the Initiative has received a positive response from regional representatives. In addition, the dedicated funding for governance and partnerships has supported the establishment of regional governance structures in all provinces and territories.** Among Métis partners, some (5 out of 11) indicated that there was an overall satisfaction with the partnership model. However, the roles and responsibilities among partners was a work in progress.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's Inuit ELCC evaluation found that "the new partnership model intended to facilitate Indigenous-led decision-making to advance national and regional priorities was viewed widely as a success, transforming the relationship between Inuit and Canada. Establishing the Inuit National Partnership Table on Early Learning and Child Care was widely supported, and operationally viewed as an extension of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group" (Consult Annex H).

Adoption of a distinction-based approach – The delivery model following a distinction-based approach for the Initiative was highlighted by Indigenous partners through interviews as an important facilitator in enabling Indigenous-influence and decision-making for Indigenous ELCC programs and supports. Among Métis partners, many (8 out of 11) indicated that the distinction-based funding approach was a key factor in supporting Métis-led decision-making, and additional understanding of Métis-specific ELCC priorities was important for the delivery of the Initiative and development of future partnerships. **Among First Nations partners, some (5 out of 11) reported that the recognition of their First Nations distinction in terms of ELCC allows them to provide culturally responsive ELCC.**

the Initiative...has been designed in a way that allows communities to first define what [ELCC] is for them and then to respond to the needs in ways that are that are meaningful and culturally appropriate – **First Nations partner**

Inuit Evaluation Success Story

The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has recently undertaken a separate mid-term evaluation of the Inuit ELCC Framework, in line with Inuit self determination principles and monitoring, learning and evaluation priorities identified within the Framework. This is an important step in the ELCC space for fostering Indigenous-led decision making. This evaluation is intended to guide continued implementation of the Inuit ELCC Framework, and the collaborative approach that has been fostered with Canada, consistent with the federally adopted Inuit Nunangat Policy, that also recognizes Inuit self determination goals (refer to Annex H for the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Inuit Early Learning and Child Care Framework).

Initiative characteristics and factors that hindered Indigenous-led ELCC design and delivery

The evaluation identified some design and implementation characteristics of the Initiative that were highlighted in interviews and the document review as hindering Indigenous influence and decision making for Indigenous ELCC design and delivery.

Challenges related to ongoing clarification and communication of representation, roles and responsibilities : It was noted that a few Indigenous ELCC Regional Tables had experienced an ongoing need for clarification regarding representation, roles and responsibilities that the Indigenous partners have in relation to decision-making and influence in the same region. A few internal respondents (2 out of 27) viewed the challenges encountered in these situations partially resulting from the attempt to follow the same model of Table development across different regions and distinction-groups, when developing different models might provide a better solution.

Challenges with inclusion and consideration of off reserve²⁵ and off territory²⁶ Indigenous perspectives in ELCC decision-making: The AHSUNC evaluation noted that the distinction-based decision-making structure for the majority of Indigenous ELCC funding does not directly address the needs of off reserve or off territory and urban Indigenous communities. The evaluation reported that representatives from these groups and communities have generally been left out of discussions at regional Indigenous ELCC decision-making tables. As a result, these representatives felt that the current framework does not sufficiently meet the needs of off reserve and off territory Indigenous children and families.

Time and communication required to adequately implement and build capacity for Indigenous-led ELCC: The processes involved in the development of Tables, identification of priorities, and development of workplans was perceived by a few internal respondents (2 out of 27) as proceeding too rapidly. Among First Nations partners, the need for improved communication between First Nations partners and the federal partners was highlighted within the discussion of timelines. Some First Nations (5 out of 11) partners indicated that, the Initiative could share more information, provide more time when requesting deliverables, and be aware of

²⁵ In the context of the AHSUNC evaluation, "off reserve and off territory" specifically refers to 'not on-reserve'. Therefore, it does not include the communities that AHSOR is designed to support.

²⁶ Traditional territories, or off- territory or lands refer to areas that an Indigenous people, group or nation has occupied and used for many generations prior to the establishment of reserves, which were imposed on First Nations by the Crown. The boundaries of reserves do not always correspond to an Indigenous groups' traditional territories; some reserves were established that required Indigenous people, groups or nations to relocate, in some cases far away from their homelands.

Indigenous holidays when establishing deadlines or requesting information. The Assembly of First Nations' written submission noted that coordination amongst federal departments seems to be lacking, with some departments having access to different information than others regarding the implementation of the Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative. As well, the Assembly of First Nations noted that the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat has repeatedly sought time-sensitive decisions that require the approval of First Nations leadership at times outside of the Assembly cycle, which has constrained the ability of First Nations leadership to meaningfully engage on important matters pertaining to ELCC, including funding decisions. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's Inuit ELCC evaluation found that "the [Government of Canada] implementation of this policy was predicated on assumptions that were unrealistic, particularly the time required for, and scope of the transfer, without full appreciation of the breadth of this major change management exercise" (Consult Annex H).

Timing and efficiency of funding and decisions – As highlighted previously, Indigenous

"aligning decision making and operational processes with theirs...we still have some work to do to make that all work best for our partners... given the reality of government and how slow moving the machinery can be" – **Internal respondent**

leadership makes decisions on regional allocations, work plans and priorities for the use of funding before its dispersion.

A few respondents (2 out of 27) stated that the "internal machinery" to implement Indigenous leadership decision²⁷ requires

time and typically has occurred late in the fiscal year (third or fourth quarter) for which the funding is dispersed, in light of the timing when Indigenous leadership decisions are made. This reality is further complicated by the fact that decisions have thus far been provided on an annual, rather than multi-year basis, requiring this internal machinery work to be repeated every fiscal year.

The timing (delays) and efficiency of the year-to-year funding allocations under the Initiative was highlighted among some internal respondents (8 out of 27) and some Indigenous partners as a factor impeding Indigenous-led planning and decision making in the design and delivery of Indigenous ELCC programs and services.

Among the First Nations partners, many (6 out of 11) reported that Initiative's funding was not distributed on a timely basis which adds unnecessary pressure on the ELCC service providers, hinders planning and impacts outcomes. The Assembly of First Nations submission also noted that the delay of funding to regional bodies until late in the fiscal year presents significant challenges along with concern and frustration with the required rush to spend funds in the last quarter of the fiscal year and then cash manage for a significant period of time during the fiscal year. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's Inuit ELCC evaluation highlighted that "for Inuit recipients, funding

"We were already out of that fiscal year and into another before the funding was released. That's not effective. That's not a way to be able to run programming...we're either cutting back on programming or staffing...funding needs to come before [we start planning and implementing ELCC], not after." – **First Nations partner**

now arrives early in the fiscal year, annual incremental increases are clear, and multiyear funding has allowed for long-term planning (for example, to support capital-intensive and longer-term infrastructure development)" (Consult Annex H), and that overall, "streamlining

²⁷ This can refer to, for example, internal timelines to include interdepartmental transfers through Supplementary Estimates for parliamentary approval. It can also refer to the time required to make changes or establish a new funding agreement as well as to obtain approvals for agreement amendments from the delegated financial authority and to secure signatures from all of the parties to the agreement.

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ELCC funding has been a clear area of success for what has hitherto been an intractable issue” (Consult Annex H)

Federal funding formulas and distinction-based allocations – Indigenous partners highlighted the federal funding amounts and formulas used to determine funding as a hindrance to decision-making and being able to fund key priorities for Indigenous ELCC. Among Métis partners, many (7 out of 11) reported that the funding allocation methodology led to underfunding, which was an important factor that impeded the delivery of ELCC services. In addition, a need for greater transparency around funding formulas and funding allocation was highlighted by Métis partners.

Among First Nations, some partners (3 out of 11) reported on issues related to the distribution of

“We are sharing funding with [other Treaty holders] who look totally different than what [we look]. You know, they're all next to big centers and we're not. And that makes it extremely difficult [for us to provide] any kind of services, whether it be some building supplies or it is a speech pathologist. All those things are extremely difficult for us to access.” – **First Nations partner**

funding indicating that the funding formula does not consider the specific communities/regional needs (for example, rural remote ELCC provider's lack of professional services and infrastructure). In addition, according to a few First Nations partners (1 out of 11), the delays in discussions around the funding distributions delayed the

reception and use of funding. Consequently, this prevented them from providing timely ELCC services and support. The Assembly of First Nations noted in their written submission that “First Nations ELCC programs and services have been underfunded for decades, resulting in gaps in programming, staffing, capacity, infrastructure, and outcomes. First Nations and National Expert Working Groups regional representatives have expressed that the needs and barriers experienced in their communities are a result of persistent underfunding, lack of funding predictability and ability to do forward planning due to a single-year funding agreement approach, and the rapid growth of the First Nations child population. Funding for programs and services in First Nations communities has not kept pace with the rate of population growth or inflation, thereby failing to adequately meet the needs of the First Nations children and families served.”

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s Inuit ELCC evaluation highlighted that “Funding levels were not viewed by Inuit Land Claims Organizations and other Inuit organizations as adequate to stabilize the ELCC sector, particularly in the difficult post-COVID context, and meet the needs of Inuit regions and urban centres outside Inuit Nunangat” (Consult Annex H).

The AHSUNC evaluation noted that there are issues regarding the portion of the Indigenous ELCC funding allocated to off reserve and off territory Indigenous populations, and that there is the perception among these communities that current Indigenous ELCC allocations for pan-Indigenous funding are not proportional to the population of Indigenous peoples living off-reserve or off-territory.

Implementation Challenges and Considerations related to COVID-19 pandemic

According to most internal respondents (21 out of 27), Métis (8 out of 11), and First Nations partners (8 out of 11), the pandemic presented challenges and delays in the Initiative’s implementation. A few (2 out of 11) Métis partners believed that COVID-19 posed challenges in the delivery of the Initiative. They stated that there was a need to move the delivery of ELCC virtually due to the pandemic causing fatigue with screen time and receiving support exclusively online. This was confirmed by a review of documents which indicated that there was reduction in available ELCC activities with some child care centres shifting to at-home educational kits and virtual activities.

The Assembly of First Nations noted in their written submission that “First Nations have demonstrated innovation and dedication to providing high quality, culturally relevant supports and programs to their children and families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. While service delivery was significantly impacted during COVID-19 restrictions due to mandated closures of childcare centres and public health measures such as gathering size limits and social distancing, First Nations quickly transitioned from in-person childcare programming to virtual parenting supports, food hampers, activity baskets, and land-based learning, to ensure ongoing supports for families.”

There were also delays in shipment of food and medical supplies due to COVID-19 according to a few Métis partners (2 out of 11). Nevertheless, a few programs implemented across Métis communities during the pandemic became permanent. Similarly, some First Nations partners (3 out of 11) stated that the program continued to be adapted, however there was a limited number of children served in person due to higher expense related to sanitization, cleaning, and health. An indirect challenge mentioned by a few First Nations (2 out of 11) and Métis partners (2 out of 11) was that the cost of transportation and housing went up, so it is harder to attract specialists in the northern and remote communities. Consequently, access to services is limited compared to years prior to COVID-19. A review of documents also suggested that there was a difficulty in finding qualified early childhood educators due to staffing shortages and staff turnover. Moreover, post-pandemic, there were some challenges in reintegration of services for Métis children from online to in-person services and this resulted in mental wellness related challenges, according to some Métis (3 out of 11) informants. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s Inuit ELCC Evaluation noted that “COVID had a major impact on the provision of ELCC services across Inuit Nunangat, and most child care centres had to shut down for several months. Indigenous ELCC agreement holders and child care centres were able to quickly pivot and demonstrated real innovation in supporting children and families during this period. Supplemental Government of Canada pandemic emergency funding and flexibility in administering existing ELCC contribution agreements was a key support.” (Consult Annex H). “What COVID-19 did reveal is the strong integrity of the ELCC system across Inuit Nunangat, due to the quick response and real innovation of agreement holders in supporting children and families during this period, underwritten by federal government emergency investment.” (Consult Annex H).

“ [The] pandemic had profound effect in implementing new program that requires people to come together. It disproportionately affected Métis women working in the service industry – which had effects on families and created large problems. It slowed down in understanding of how ELCC would be implemented, and an understanding of the program and the delivery of the interventions.”

- Métis partner

“One of the things that changed that had a big impact on the communities is after COVID, it seems like the communities lost all their speech pathologists, psychologists, so a lot of our communities are sharing them with the urban town that’s close by and some of our kids are just not even getting assessed because by the time they are ready to come out and do the assessments that kids [have] already transitioned into the kindergarten at the other school.”

- Métis partner

Most internal respondents (21 out of 27) noted that the emergency funding allowed Indigenous partners to move to online or virtual support for parents and families. As well, this funding allowed Indigenous partners to provide Personal Protective Equipment, kits, and day-to-day equipment and adapted the programming based on the needs of families. However, there was a recognition that these challenges evolved over time. Some Métis partners (3 out of 11) and internal respondents (8 out of 27) also indicated that the extension of end dates of contribution agreements

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during COVID-19 to communities and organizations gave them the additional time to spend the funds. A few internal respondents (5 out of 27) also indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the implementation and development of partnership tables. Often, meeting in-person is viewed as being important and is a preferred method of engagement with federal partners for Indigenous partners. Due to the prolonged COVID-19 travel restrictions and physical distancing measures, in-person meetings between federal and Indigenous partners were severely restricted during the pandemic. With the lifting of restrictions, in-person meetings with partnership tables have resumed as of late 2022 and early 2023 where possible.

COVID-19 Emergency Management

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Canada supported First Nations, Inuit and the Métis Nation in their work to ensure that all families stayed safe and healthy. Where Indigenous ELCC sites were not able to reopen in accordance with public health measures, the temporary emergency funding supported the provision of alternative Indigenous ELCC programs and services for children and families or training activities by ELCC staff and educators.

The Government of Canada invested \$120 million in emergency funding to support the safe reopening of Indigenous ELCC centres and to assist First Nations, Inuit and Métis parents to return to work (refer to section on Initiative's Resources for additional information about this investment). The funds were advanced based on direction and confirmation from Indigenous partners. Each department was required to advance funding commensurate with their proportional funding split, but in a coherent fashion, recognizing the strict timelines imposed around the one-time availability of this emergency funding. This funding helped to ensure the continued availability of safe and culturally appropriate Indigenous early learning and childcare programs and services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

This one-time funding was announced in 2020 and supported a number of activities for Indigenous communities, including:

- **education or training or supports:** updated technology for at-home learning, tablets, printers, cameras, educational kits for children to learn, books, activity kits, toys, as well as Elder and Knowledge keeper support for children and families
- **mental health support:** emotional and mental health support to children and families
- **hiring of new staff:** hiring of new staff including security, new ELCC workers, drivers for school buses or transportation, janitorial and sanitation workers to increase cleaning and sanitizing of daycares office support, better child to staff ratios, Elder supports, and contractors
- **buying new Personal Protective Equipment:** buying new Personal Protective Equipment with emergency Indigenous ELCC allocations included buying hand sanitizer, masks, new hand towels, office scrubs, and clothing for children for in-daycare use, gloves
- **renovations:** purchase and installation of new mobile units, safe barriers, plexiglass, room dividers, updated no-touch fixtures, and updated Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning filtration devices to update structures to improve health and safety of children, families, and facility staff
- **wage subsidy:** increase in salary for staff and danger pay due to COVID-19: wage subsidies, raises, danger pay was included in several agreements to retain workers, to provide pandemic pay to front line employees, wage increases, and paid family leave, and
- **distributing funds to subsidise food purchases, food vouchers and food hampers for children and families:** acquisition and distribution of food hampers for children and families

affected by stay-at-home orders formed another significant area of investment to ensure that children who would have attended daycare have access to funded meals that would normally be served by the daycare.

Contributions to improvements in the quality, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC

Summary of findings

While there is evidence that the AHSUNC and AHSOR programs are contributing to improvements in both the quality and cultural appropriateness of Indigenous ELCC, the evaluation found some limited evidence of the extent to which the Initiative's other components are contributing to these areas. This is largely due to the limited distinction-based data and performance information currently available on outputs and early outcomes at this stage of the Initiative given the ongoing co-development of results frameworks expected to be completed by March 2025. The Phase 1 evaluation was able to identify examples of positive outcomes through a small number of interviews with Indigenous partners and some documented success stories. This included those pertaining to language preservation efforts, building confidence in participants' own cultures and identities, cultural connectedness activities, culturally appropriate training for ELCC workers, and partnership and governance activities to coordinate and collaborate across organizations.

During the period covered by the evaluation, the work undertaken on developing a set of interim indicators and feedback from Indigenous partners have provided important learnings and considerations in moving forward with the co-development of the results frameworks, and ultimately being able to further inform improvements in the areas of quality, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC.

Thirty-two QIP have been funded and approximately one-third completed. At this stage of the Initiative, there was limited data or information available on the extent to which completed project outputs have been disseminated or have been used to improve the quality or cultural appropriateness of Indigenous ELCC. Indications from interviews with First Nations and Métis are that the Indigenous ELCC framework assists them in delivering quality and culturally appropriate Indigenous ELCC.

Lastly, over the evaluation period, the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on the accessibility of service organizations, including ELCC in Indigenous communities. According to Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's Inuit ELCC evaluation, the pandemic put a pause on the efforts of communities to improve ELCC facilities. There is anecdotal evidence that some progress has been made in meeting the needs of Inuit communities, but respondents stated that many Inuit communities continue to have urgent child care needs.

Requirements for the interim results reporting

Historically, ESDC did not collect program data for its First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) as this Initiative was a small element of the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy, now known as Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program and was not tracked separately. In addition, the AHSUNC and AHSOR (as part of the Healthy Child and Development Initiative) collected information on health and well being outcomes and outputs for First Nations On-Reserve and Off-Reserve as well as the Inuit infants, children, and families as part of their respective program performance data. The majority of the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy funding recipients transitioned to an Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program agreement in 2019.

Upon the inception of the Initiative and to establish a baseline of Indigenous ELCC results, ESDC, and other federal and Indigenous partners adopted a strategy during the fiscal years 2019 to 2020 to begin to establish baseline data against eight interim indicators related to the availability, accessibility, and quality of Indigenous ELCC. Interim indicators were developed to be aligned with historical reporting requirements of AHSOR and AHSUNC.

The intent of the information collected was to assist federal and Indigenous partners to make informed decisions, set priorities, measure progress, and demonstrate results. It also demonstrated the need for new or expanded ELCC programs and services. The eight interim indicators are listed below:

Access

- number of children accessing early learning services (0 to 2 years of age)
- number of children accessing early learning services (3 to 6 years of age)
- number of children on waitlists
- number of sites offering child care services, and
- number of child care spaces available.

Quality

- number of sites that have Indigenous language content available
- number of sites that have traditional ceremonies or cultural activities available, and
- number of sites that have parental or family support available.

Indigenous partners with an active Indigenous ELCC stand alone agreement or an Indigenous ELCC schedule to their Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program (formerly known as the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy) agreements are required to report on these interim indicators.

Under this interim approach, there were no changes in reporting for the Head Start programs, that is the AHSOR and AHSUNC.

At this stage of the Initiative, there is limited evidence informing the extent to which the Initiative is contributing to the improvements in the quality, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC. The work on co-development of results frameworks is ongoing with partners and is not expected to be completed until March 2025. The Framework (2018) identified and foresaw the challenges associated with informing and evaluating progress at the outset.

This keystone document for the Initiative noted:

“Better documentation of children’s experiences and learning, alongside community-based review or evaluation, is necessary to address data gaps, provide evidence for planning and create greater accountability to children, families, and other partners. To determine whether Indigenous ELCC programs are meeting the needs of Indigenous children and the expectations of their parents and communities, a responsive approach to supporting improved documentation, program planning, data collection, performance measurement, and multiple levels of evaluation (particularly Indigenous developed) will need to be created. New approaches for sharing this information with program administrators, parents and communities for decision-making purposes are also needed.” (Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework)

The distinction-based co-development work identified in the Framework is currently being led by Indigenous partners and ESDC, as the lead federal department. ESDC also plays a horizontal coordination role with federal partner departments. During the period covered by the evaluation, work has been initiated to co-develop results frameworks and an overall performance measurement strategy for the Initiative. The evaluation noted that the current status of performance measurement varies for each of the 3 main federal partners.

ESDC: Data Collection on Indigenous ELCC and FNICCI

As mentioned previously, historically, ESDC did not collect program data for FNICCI. Childcare funding was a small element of the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy and was not tracked separately. As an interim measure while the reporting and distinction-based results frameworks are being co-developed for the Initiative, ESDC, and other federal and Indigenous partners adopted a strategy in the fiscal year 2019 to 2020 to begin to establish baseline data against 8 interim indicators related to the availability, accessibility, and quality of Indigenous ELCC programs and services (Legacy programs and new investments). The interim indicators were aligned with existing reporting requirements of AHSOR and AHSUNC. These 8 interim indicators were introduced to ESDC Indigenous ELCC and FNICCI funding recipients part way through the 2019 to 2020 fiscal year. Initial reporting on these indicators for the ESDC Indigenous ELCC funding recipients has been challenging given the delays in data collection, in part, due to COVID-19 impacts, low completion rates among recipients submitting data for some indicators, and data quality due to inconsistencies with interpretation of some indicators by recipients. In addition, in some cases the indicator data was incomplete with varying levels of responses for each indicator. For some recipients, the indicators did not apply given they had limited or no early learning programming or limited access to child care centres and are currently in the process of building these services. Moreover, some funding recipients created their own indicator template and not all of these encompassed the indicators covered under the interim reporting framework. For these recipients the mismatch between the interim indicators and their programming has created challenges to adequately report on Indigenous ELCC interim indicators.

Furthermore, initial compilations of the data in 2022 demonstrate that over the 2 year period of data collection, less than two-thirds of the funding recipients (62%) reported on all 8 indicators, while approximately one-quarter (23% to 29%) did not report on any indicators due to 1 or more reasons mentioned above. For FNICCI, some reporting has been delayed, incomplete or inconsistent. As of April 2022, out of the 98 recipients in the year 2019 to 2020 ESDC Indigenous ELCC, 61 recipients (62%) submitted reports on all 8 indicators, 15 (15%) submitted

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reports on some of the 8 indicators, and 22 recipients (22%) did not report on any of the 8 indicators.

In fiscal year 2022 to 2023, a revised annual reporting template was developed for the Initiative (including FNICCI). This was implemented with the aim of better explaining the 8 interim indicators and improving reporting. This reporting template has been rolled out such that it could be used by the recipients beginning in the 2021 to 2022 fiscal year²⁸. While the indicator content was largely the same, the reporting template included additional information on the definitions for the 8 indicators to assist recipients with reporting. It also included the ability for organizations to provide insights on their successes and challenges.

According to some interviewed internal respondents (10 out of 27) confirmed that while there was a recognition that the co-developed results framework with Indigenous partners is underway, there were limitations in the effectiveness of the current set of 8 interim indicators in the reporting, monitoring, and measuring any improvements attributable to the Initiative. A few respondents (5 out of 27) noted that the data collection efforts to date have resulted in administrative burden for some communities.

While not yet at the stage of informing the baseline data and early progress achieved, the initial work on preliminary Indigenous ELCC indicators has uncovered a number of takeaways and considerations that can inform the ongoing co-development of results frameworks.

Within a formative focus, the evaluation identified these as **building trust and data sharing protocols** as a key area. The relatively low rates of participation in providing data among organizations (62%) was likely a combination of a multitude of factors including pandemic impacts, challenges in understanding what was required and what the data would be used for and by whom. The development and implementation of data collection for the eight interim indicators occurred during a particularly challenging time for most Indigenous partners as they were attempting to deal with the immediate and medium-term impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic was having on their communities and specifically on the design and delivery of Indigenous ELCC. As highlighted in interviews with Indigenous partners, their organizations and delivery structures were already stretched to meet demands and adapt, so the introduction of new data collection and reporting during this period likely was challenging and potentially affected the level of buy-in from partners given other priorities from the onset.

In addition, it was also key to **consider distinction First Nations, Inuit and Métis priorities and its relevance to Indigenous communities**. Interviews with federal and Indigenous partners noted that the measurement of outcomes for the Initiative need to consider distinctions groups when developing indicators, prioritizing outcomes, and measurement, and understanding success. The AHSUNC evaluation also highlighted the need to consider off reserve or off territory and urban Indigenous communities' perspectives in the development of frameworks. A set of common indicators may or may not be adequate depending on context, priorities, and cultures. This learning is being applied with the co-development of potentially multiple results frameworks.

An **adequate infrastructure to support performance measurement** was viewed as important factor. It was noted during interviews that the processes, systems and capacity for data collection and reporting vary considerably across Indigenous communities and organizations

²⁸ For FY 2021 to 2022, 81% (79 out of 97) of the FNICCI/Indigenous ELCC reports have been received by ESDC as of April 1, 2023. However, the data received from these reports has not been verified, validated, and analyzed for the 8 indicators.

ranging from sophisticated case management systems to PDF templates that need to be manually compiled and completed. This variability in infrastructure needs to be considered in the development of indicators and results reporting requirements.

ISC: Data collection for AHSOR and Indigenous ELCC

ISC collects Indigenous ELCC data through the [Community Based Reporting Template](#), which is part of the mandatory AHSOR program reporting for recipients in set, fixed, and flex funding agreements. Recipients in block or grant funding agreements do not have this requirement. This aligns with Government of Canada's commitment to the new fiscal relationship, and the transition to self-determination and decreased reporting burden for Indigenous partners. The data does not include British Columbia, as AHSOR programming in that region was transferred to the First Nations Health Authority.

Due to public health measures that closed AHSOR centres for a large portion of the year 2020 to 2021, programming was run atypically and within a different context. In addition, it took time for centres to resume their regular programming, even as Public health restrictions lifted.

It is important to understand the recent data within this context, as it illustrates the flexibility and pivoting of service models for Indigenous communities undertaken during a global pandemic.

PHAC: Data collection for AHSUNC and Indigenous ELCC

The AHSUNC performance data was previously collected through 2 separate tools:

- the Children's Programs Performance Measurement Tool, which is collected every 2 years, and
- the Annual Reporting Tool (which includes the interim indicators) collected each year.

At present, the volume of reporting required (number of indicators, number of templates) imposes a significant administrative burden on recipients. As a result, PHAC moved to a single streamlined reporting document in the fiscal year 2022 to 2023, which collects data against the 8 Indigenous ELCC interim indicators.

Expectations by Indigenous partners for performance measurement

Interviews and responses from Indigenous partners highlighted the importance of data and analyses that inform needs assessments, planning, results reporting and overall performance of the Initiative while developing data collection strategies that are not overly burdensome. This could include Indigenous-led protocols, frameworks and data systems that inform the challenges, strengths, successes, and promising practices and illustrate the overall performance story of the Initiative.

Among the Métis partners, some (4 out of 11) indicated that the lack of capacity to collect and report on data on community-specific needs was a factor that impeded Indigenous-led ELCC planning. They also noted that for some there are challenges establishing an infrastructure for data systems and collecting relevant data for needs assessments (such as, baseline information). A few Métis partners (2 out of 11) highlighted the need for 'strength-based' approaches and narratives to data collection as opposed to a 'deficit-based' approach that solely focuses on the limitations and challenges of Métis communities. A few Métis partners (3 out of 11) also noted the importance of Indigenous data sovereignty while collecting and analyzing Métis ELCC data for program performance, reporting and research. A few Métis partners (1 out of 11) also highlighted the need for a horizontal approach to data collection across all Métis programming in the future. Nevertheless, the document review found that some Indigenous partners have already advanced

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considerably in their work on reporting results by moving ahead in the development of evaluation frameworks, data collection strategies, baseline data, and indicator development.

“The major success [of our organization] was filling of many gaps in data, strengths-based narratives and approaches to data gathering as opposed to a deficits-based approach. A lot of them position them as vulnerable and in need of support in saving.” –**Métis partner**

“The horizontal management of Initiative is a key. [We] cannot think of Indigenous ELCC in isolation from other programs, for example, Post Secondary Education, Indigenous Skills and Employment Training. These could be integrated within the scope of all the programs to reduce reporting burden” [This] could be a creation of a Métis Nation Center for statistical information, Métis-led, Métis-controlled institution to provide data”.– **Métis partner**

In their written response, the Assembly of First Nations noted that measuring progress under the Indigenous ELCC Framework is challenging without a co-developed results framework. This remains a priority for the Assembly of First Nations and the National Expert Working Group and is outlined as a goal and key priority in the First Nations ELCC Framework. The Assembly of First Nations indicated that continued work towards a co-developed results and evaluation framework will support a better understanding of the impacts of the Indigenous ELCC Initiative on First Nations in the long-term.

First Nations partners found that there were different perceptions of the administrative burden resulting from data collection ranging from light to heavy. Those who indicated a heavier administrative burden (3 out of 11) attributed this in part to the lack of alignment between the specific data requested across various programs and initiatives. A few interviewed First Nations partners (2 out of 11) also pointed to issues around data sovereignty and a recognized need for improved access to federally managed First Nations data, which would facilitate informed and responsive planning by First Nations leaders. These partners reported that there was currently a limited understanding of the ELCC needs and investments that impedes effective investment planning and capacity strengthening. Suggestions included developing alternative approaches to data collection and analysis that align with local context, through which strengths, challenges, successes, and needs can be explored. There was a recognition however that this will require extensive support and consistent messaging across all levels of government.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s Inuit ELCC evaluation highlighted that “Improving ongoing performance measurement of the Inuit ELCC Framework is an urgent priority. A performance measurement framework is a key tool to help clarify and communicate expected program results and targets, and is central to planning and decision-making, monitoring and reporting, and accountability. To date, a handful of interim performance indicators were developed by ESDC with no input from Inuit organizations. It is recognized that these indicators now need to be revisited so that more information is available on the progress being made in achieving the intended outcomes of the Indigenous ELCC Framework” (Consult Annex H).

Quality Improvement Projects (QIP)

As mentioned earlier, the Initiative also comprised a funding stream for Quality Improvement Projects (QIP) over the period from 2019 to 2020 through 2022 to 2023. QIP are intended to contribute to a pool of knowledge and expertise, such as best practices, models, and innovation, for Indigenous-led early learning and child care. [Phase 1 QIP funding](#) was for the fiscal years from 2019 to 2020 through 2020 to 2021 and Phase 2 QIP covered fiscal years 2021 to 2022 and 2022

to 2023²⁹. These projects were awarded following a solicited (Phase 1) and open (Phase 2) call for proposals seeking project concepts focused on Indigenous governments and organizations who wanted to develop or expand practices that support a high-quality Indigenous ELCC systems through promising or innovative practices such as, but not limited to:

- developing authentic cultural and language revitalization resources
- demonstrating how a successful model of learning or administration could be replicated or expanded in different settings
- exploring alternative service delivery models in rural and remote communities
- enhancing professional capacity in program expertise, planning and administration
- creating centres of excellence or networks
- addressing data and research gaps (for example, defining and measuring quality in an Indigenous context, using Indigenous methods of evaluation, etc.), and
- fostering links to provincial and territorial service delivery in urban settings through new partnerships with Indigenous organizations.

These projects sought to define what high-quality Indigenous ELCC means to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. Project examples under the second and third call for proposals identified examples of projects for consideration. These could include:

- designing governance models that support Indigenous-led ELCC decision-making
- testing different ways of developing partnerships
- designing ways to measure results and success
- finding ways to support ongoing education and training for Indigenous ELCC leaders, management, and staff
- building and strengthening local Indigenous ELCC licensing rules and procedures, and
- making tools and training that support Indigenous ELCC staff who work with children with special needs.

The 32 projects have been undertaken by 29 Indigenous organizations and have focused on addressing Indigenous-identified priorities across various areas of Indigenous ELCC design and delivery. Many of the projects focus on developing curriculum, learning resources and activities that integrate cultural learnings and principles and language resources. Some of the projects include a research component to inform development of tools and resources. Examples of projects include:

- Métis Nation Saskatchewan conducted a project entitled “Who I Am” Reinforcing Metis Identity and Healthy Early Years Brain Development Through Cultural Teachings during which they developed resources for ELCC that integrates Elder knowledge and intergenerational understanding of Métis culture and identity with an adult understanding of healthy child brain development and the impact of adverse childhood experiences. These are

²⁹ The Phase 2 QIP projects provided funding to Indigenous communities, governments and organizations that are exploring ways to improve Indigenous ELCC. A maximum of \$750,000 could be provided. Indigenous communities, governments and organizations were given 24 months for completion by March 31, 2023. For some projects, the deadlines for project completion were extended.

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being distributed to early learning centres, childcare centres, family resource centres and schools, and training sessions will be provided on how to use the resource.

- The Centre for Aboriginal Human Resource Development implemented a project to Indigenize the early childhood educator’s curriculum. The primary objective of the project was to improve relevance and quality of the current early childhood educator post secondary curriculum to be more accessible through its incorporation of Indigenous traditions, culture, and content. By incorporating an Indigenous lens in the re-development of the existing early childhood educator’s curriculum, it was anticipated that early childhood education students will see themselves and the future students they work with as more reflected in the curriculum. On a broader level, it is hoped that increasing early childhood educator students understanding of their history and culture will support a reclamation of identity in young children in the day care setting. An evaluation conducted on the project concluded that the curriculum was comprehensive, meeting the standards of early childhood educators’ content, representative of all 3 major Indigenous groups in Canada and was produced with the necessary engagement of local experts.
- Cree Nation Government undertook a project that developed a culturally relevant educational curriculum and the tools necessary for the educators to implement children’s activities that are rich in Cree culture and language. These included a planning book and an activity guide to help guide the educators, recipe cards with traditional recipes, a calendar, and a board game. These are being distributed to local childcare centres.

As illustrated in Table 2, there have been QIP funded in each province and territory³⁰.

Table 2: Phase 1 and Phase 2 Quality Improvement Projects by Province and Territory (2019 to 2020 through 2022 to 2023)

Province and Territory	Commitments (\$)	Total (%)	Number of organizations
Overall	\$13,435,573	100%	29
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$378,286	3.0%	1
Nova Scotia	\$737,300	5.0%	1
New Brunswick	\$1,080,070	8.0%	2
Prince Edward Island	\$311,858	2.3%	1
Quebec	\$1,357,436	10.1%	3
Ontario	\$2,623,388	19.5%	7
Manitoba	\$1,460,284	11.0%	3
Saskatchewan	\$1,425,977	11.0%	2
Alberta	\$1,218,785	9.1%	3
British Columbia	\$1,612,128	12.0%	3
Nunavut	\$740,259	5.5%	1
Northwest Territories	\$149,500	1.0%	1
Yukon	\$340,302	2.5%	1

Source: Program Operations Branch (POB), ESDC

By March 2023, for when this evaluation timeline ends, 13 projects from Phase 1 have been completed, and 19 projects from Phase 2 were underway. A review of the projects broken down

³⁰ QIP funding is not allocated or tracked on a distinction’s basis.

by region highlights that a large number of Phase 1 and Phase 2 projects are in the Ontario (8 in total) and Western region of the country (11 in total).

A review of available completed projects' final reports from Phase 1 indicate that most (11 of 13 reports) achieved their planned outputs and include some preliminary outcomes despite challenges encountered with the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the nature of many of these projects (for example, curriculum development, tool development, etc.), it is anticipated that the impact on areas such as quality and cultural appropriateness will be observable as these tools and project outputs are disseminated and fully implemented over time. An important next step to demonstrate the impact of these projects will be to collect data to determine the extent to which there has been systematic dissemination and information sharing of the results of funded QIP. Building on this, it will then be important to gather data directly from users of the QIP' results or products to assess how these projects are contributing towards an increase in quality of Indigenous ELCC.

The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Evaluation noted that “ESDC’s proposal-driven Quality Improvement Project was criticized because it is working counter to the streamlining of ELCC funding agreements to help reduce reporting and other administrative requirements, and development of multi-year funding to enable long-term planning” (Consult Annex H).

A few First Nation partners (1 out of 11) also noted administrative and communication challenges with ESDC, while seeking clarification on the Phase 2 QIP Proposal criteria and funding process.

Cultural appropriateness

The evaluation found examples of increasing cultural appropriateness in a ‘summary of progress developed for the Director General Interdepartmental Committee. The summary noted that as of September 2022 there had been early progress with Indigenous partners that has focused on enhancement to ensure culturally appropriate ELCC, including curriculum development and linguistic revitalization and immersion programs. The review of the sample workplans identified that all of the planned activities are focused on designing, delivering, and implementing culturally appropriate, holistic and quality ELCC. Examples include language preservation efforts, building confidence in participants’ own cultures and identities. It is also provided an accurate portrayal of Indigenous cultures, cultural connectedness activities, culturally appropriate training for ELCC workers, cultural kits, encouraging Indigenous people to train as ELCC workers. In addition, it also includes partnership and governance activities to coordinate and collaborate across organizations, communities, and stakeholders.

Métis success stories

Specific examples of successes in the Métis ELCC sphere comprise the development of culturally appropriate ELCC resources, hiring Métis students to assist with summer camps, and Michif and Dene language immersion in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. This included plans to expand to additional school divisions via partnerships with provincial education authorities, local school boards and the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.

The Métis Nation of Ontario’s ELCC branch has many programs to ensure that the approach to supporting Métis children is multifaceted and interconnected. For example, the ELCC Development Consultant Program provide support to Métis children by providing advocacy and navigation services. The Special Projects Program continually offers programs, kits, and workshops to ensure that we meet any needs Métis children, and their families may have. These include:

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- Early Learning Camps, which are run twice a year and invite families from across Ontario to come together to learn about their Métis culture in an inclusive space
 - The Early Learning Socials, which are provided on various topics and invite Métis children and families to come together virtually to learn and develop skills in a fun, play-based way, and
 - Early Learning Kits, which are developed annually and include several themes. This included a baby bundle kit, culture kit, back to school backpacks, grandparent kit, stem kit and a future nature kit.
- The Early Learning Conference is held annually and is hosted to bring together the Métis community, educators, and sector stakeholders to provide opportunities to learn and build relationships to foster the inclusivity of Métis children in their classrooms.

The 2024 evaluation of AHSUNC Program reported that AHSUNC responds to an ongoing and increasing need for early childhood development programming for Indigenous children and their families living in off-reserve, off-territory and northern communities that is holistic, culturally focused, and accessible. Furthermore, the evaluation report notes that AHSUNC sites are recognized for providing holistic programming that “embraces the entire family and community, not just the child”. The evaluation highlighted how cultural programming is one of the greatest strengths of the AHSUNC Program, including the revitalization of Indigenous languages, the participation of Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers, and the promotion of pride in Indigenous identity. However, the AHSUNC evaluation found that the current Framework and Initiative do not directly address the needs or perspectives of off reserve or off-territory and urban Indigenous communities.

The 2024 evaluation of the HCD Program found that AHSOR programs are operating with a holistic approach to supporting child development – including integration of Nation-based culture and language activities, play-based learning, health promotion, nutritious food access, and involvement of parents. Additionally, programs are integrating practices such as land-based learning and involvement of Elders in program delivery. The positive impacts of AHSOR programming have also been reported through the Regional Health Survey (RHS) and the First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education, and Employment Survey (FNREEES). To illustrate, Phase 3 of the RHS found that a higher percentage of children who attended AHSOR had any knowledge of a First Nations language (76.9%), compared to children who had not attended the program (61.2%). Additionally, the survey found that children attending AHSOR were more likely to participate in community cultural events, engage in weekly traditional activities outside of school hours, and consume traditional foods. The FNREEES also found that 73.3% of primary caregivers with children (under the age of 6) attending a First Nations–specific early childhood program (like an Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve Program) reported that their children understood them when they spoke their traditional language all of the time, compared to 57.5% of children who did not attend a First Nations–specific early childhood program.

From Indigenous partners, the evaluation collected several positive examples of how the Initiative

“My program is very specific on supporting families [...]. It allowed us to offer culturally appropriate now (in person) and virtual programs for 50 families to connect to their culture.”
- Métis partner

is beginning to make contributions to the cultural appropriateness of ELCC. Métis partners indicated that the Initiative provided a strong foundation to provide Métis-specific programming. Specifically, they reported that the Initiative supported the provision of Métis-specific safe spaces, which in turn provide community members with opportunities to learn and grow within their own culture. All Métis

partners (11 out of 11) highlighted that they were able to provide their communities access to ELCC services that were culturally appropriate, inclusive, flexible, and adaptable, due to participation in the Initiative.

Many First Nations partners (8 out of 11) indicated that the Initiative including the First Nations ELCC Framework supports communities to provide cultural-appropriate materials and services for the communities. This includes among other things the use and teaching of Indigenous languages, sharing the knowledge of Elders through ELCC, cultural crafts and activities, and raising cultural awareness of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ELCC service providers.

“We're a cultural program and we share cultural relevant information. So, we had a person that created a resource book [and] [we had cultural] virtual learning through story time [in English and in Indigenous languages]”

- **First Nations partner**

“It's part of that whole restoration of our language. We incorporate that throughout. [For example], we put up the sign of the strawberry. They would put the English and the Indigenous name and mostly we use Mohawk or Cayuga.”

- **First Nations partner**

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's Inuit ELCC evaluation noted that “access to culturally appropriate Inuit-specific curricula and Inuktitut speakers have reportedly seen some improvement over the evaluation period. A primary barrier, however, is access to fluent Inuktitut speakers, the majority who are Elders, and access to training for language instructors” (Consult Annex H).

“ It increased the number of participants in each cohort as well as the ability to deliver culturally appropriate programming. Some communities do culture camps for parents and adults. They do ribbon skirts. They do team music and Bannock making lessons. The West is very strong in the language and the East is very strong in the music. So, we're trying to bring both sides up to par.”

- **Métis partner**

Accessibility to Indigenous ELCC

During the evaluation period, ESDC has initiated work with various researchers to understand available data sources, potential baseline measures, and quantitative indicators that could possibly be adapted or further developed to inform accessibility to Indigenous ELCC according to distinction-based measures. This work is ongoing and will be integrated with the work being carried out on the co-development of the results frameworks for the Initiative.

The evaluation was able to find some evidence that the Initiative has contributed to improving accessibility to Indigenous ELCC, particularly among the Métis partners. During interviews, most Métis partners (8 out of 11) reported that at present the Initiative provides support to Métis communities which did not have support before the Initiative. They highlighted that Métis children with disabilities and those in rural and remote areas were largely excluded from ELCC services before the onset of the Initiative as there were gaps in supports to adequately meet the needs of this population.

“Significant achievements have been made, and we continue to move forward with solid workplans to educate and grow the ELCC workforce when building child care centres to create new spaces for accessible, quality child care and programming”.

- **Métis partner**

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Additionally, the urban Métis families and communities and those in rural areas are often required to access First Nations or mainstream services due to the lack of accessible Métis ELCC.

Métis success stories

Since the signing the Canada-Métis Nation ELCC Accord in 2019, the Métis Nation has achieved notable successes in establishing a robust and culturally-sensitive ELCC sector. Through a comprehensive approach that includes on-the-land cultural immersion camps, child care subsidies, space creation, early literacy initiatives, curriculum and learning aid development, and efforts to support the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, the Métis Nation has created a holistic system that caters to the diverse needs of its children while preserving its cultural heritage.

- **Child Care Subsidies:** Recognizing the importance of accessible child care, the Métis Nation of Alberta, Métis Nation of British Columbia, Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, and the Métis Nation of Ontario have implemented child care subsidies to alleviate financial burdens on families. These subsidies ensure that families, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can access high-quality ELCC services, promoting opportunities for Métis children and families including parents enrolled in further education. Within the Métis Nation of Ontario, there is no requirement for the individual to work or attend school to qualify for the subsidy. They believe that families are the best judges of their children's needs.
- **Childcare Stipend Program:** This program, was first implemented by the Métis Nation of Ontario to support citizens who faced barriers to accessing formal child care during the COVID pandemic. However, it has now transitioned into a permanent program. This program offers a stipend for families who cannot obtain formal child care and need to make alternative arrangements.
- **Child Care Space Creation:** An integral component of the Métis Nation's achievements in ELCC is the strategic construction of child care centers. These facilities provide safe, nurturing, and culturally-rich environments for children. The centres are thoughtfully designed to incorporate elements of Métis culture and aesthetics, creating spaces that reflect the communities' identity and values. They become focal points for community engagement, where families, educators, and community members collaborate to create a strong support network for the holistic development of Métis children. To date, centres have been established in British Columbia, Manitoba, and the Northwest Territories.

To complement childcare centers, home-based care options have been established, allowing children to learn in familiar environments under the guidance of trained caregivers.

According to the interviews conducted with First Nations partners, some (5 out of 11) reported that the Initiative supports the ELCC service providers to address emerging needs of their community such as professional development for early childhood educator staff, cultural activities, to the members of the community. Funding from the Initiative contributes to ELCC service providers being able to hire qualified staff to provide better services for First Nations populations.

First Nations success stories

First Nations partners in Saskatchewan continue to engage First Nations leadership in strategic planning on the best use of Indigenous ELCC funding, by coordinating between various actions ranging from additional staff, infrastructure, renovations, new buses, outdoor play spaces, cultural activities, early childhood educator training, resources, governance capacity building, to parent workshops. Indigenous ELCC Summits have also been hosted by the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nation, bringing together early childhood educators, community leaders, parents, elders, and other players in ELCC to share information and learn from each other through workshop and plenary sessions.

The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society Indigenous ELCC Investment Strategy includes interventions aimed at increasing capacity of the sector, quality of services and supports, and access. The Strategy includes wage enhancements, community-led planning and development, service development and enhancement funding, minor capital, Indigenous ELCC sector building and leadership development.

In particular, the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society has supported over 125 First Nations communities to access funding through the following funding streams:

- First Nations early childhood educator Wage Enhancement Funding: Over 400 early childhood educators received an hourly wage top-up and/or an incentive payment
- Minor Capital Funding for Indigenous ELCC (17 applications approved)
- Indigenous ELCC Service Development and Enhancement Funding (15 applications approved), and
- Emergency COVID-19 Funding for Indigenous ELCC.

The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Evaluation highlighted that “it is too early in the lifespan of the Framework to expect to see a significant increase in the number of child care spaces, given the time required to do needs assessments in communities and the planning required for new construction. Furthermore, as explained in the section Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the pandemic put a pause on the efforts of communities to improve ELCC facilities. There is anecdotal evidence that some progress has been made in meeting the needs of Inuit communities, but respondents stated that many Inuit communities continue to have urgent child care needs.” (Consult Annex H).

The 2024 HCD evaluation noted that while the AHSOR programs have demonstrably contributed to positive outcomes for children and families, several challenges to effective program delivery were also noted. Survey and community-based respondents reported infrastructure and facility concerns due to lack of space, inadequate or unsafe outdoor access, outdated facilities, and overdue repairs and renovations. Often, staff reported collaborating with community daycare programming to share costs and program space.

Furthermore, it was noted in the 2024 HCD evaluation that funding for the AHSOR component has not kept pace with population growth and changing needs and priorities of communities. Specifically, some communities reported an increase in support needs among some children entering AHSOR – including behavioural challenges, developmental delays, and children requiring speech and language support. Efforts have been made by staff to access further training and integrate supports for children, however the high demands on program staff and long wait times to access specialized services (for example, speech language pathology, occupational therapy, etc.) are creating challenges within the program and more broadly among communities. Inadequate funding has also created challenges for retaining qualified staff due to low wages and limited opportunity for salary growth.

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Infrastructure projects through Budget 2021 investments

The Initiative provides funding for minor capital for urgent repairs and renovations. ESDC, ISC and PHAC are administering the first three years of funding for minor capital investments for urgent repairs and renovations for existing Indigenous ELCC sites funded through the legacy programs.

The new investments included \$80 million per year over 3 years beginning in 2022 to 2023 and then \$24 million³¹ on an ongoing basis (total across all distinction groups³²) as announced under Budget 2021. Year 1 of this investment stream falls within this evaluation period.

Many of the reviewed workplans provided by Indigenous partners also included plans for activities that would contribute to facilities such as purchasing land for camps and programming. Furthermore, it also included identifying opportunities to acquire land or buildings for ELCC centres, and those addressing and where applicable aligning Provincial and Territorial regulations. Finally, it also included licensing and building codes based on their needs, and projects related to retrofit, renovation and expansion to meet childcare requirements. Budget 2021 also committed to the major infrastructure funding of \$420 million over 3 years, starting in 2023 to 2024, and \$21 million ongoing.³³

ESDC

The following provides an overview of ESDC's (through Service Canada) approach to allocating \$38.6 million annually beginning in 2022 to 2023 to repair and renovate existing FNICCI centres. The intake process involved a questionnaire process, completed by existing FNICCI recipients for needs assessment and urgent repairs and renovations projects. As of Spring 2023, 44% (203 of 463) of FNICCI sites had submitted proposals. Among these proposals, approximately 60% consisted of urgent repair requests and 40% requests for needs assessments. Table 3 provides an overview of actual expenditures for 2022 to 2023, by region.

³¹ Note that beginning in the fiscal year 2027 to 2028, a 3% escalator is applied to the 24 million.

³² Beginning in 2025 to 2026, funding under the urgent repairs and renovation stream will be managed and delivered through distinctions-based funding envelopes for First Nations, Inuit and Métis ELCC partners and AHSUNC, serving urban and Northern populations, rather than allocated proportionally across ESDC, PHAC and ISC towards existing legacy centres.

³³ The Budget 2021 investment for Major Infrastructure of \$420 million over three years and \$21 million ongoing was extended in Budget 2023 to be over 4 years; it is therefore now referenced as \$441 million over four years, still beginning in 2023-2024, and \$21.63 million ongoing, as the 3% escalator applies beginning year 5, to the ongoing amount.

Table 3: Actual expenditure by ESDC for Minor capital and Repairs, in 2022 to 2023 by region

Region	Number of Repair and Renovations needs	Actual expenditure ³⁴
Alberta	34	\$3,514,155
Atlantic Provinces	26	\$1,763,070
British Columbia	39	\$4,285,039
Manitoba	55	\$5,871,520
Nunavut	16	\$4,832,190
Northwest Territories	10	\$424,969
Ontario	58	\$8,764,597
Quebec	49	\$2,369,391
Saskatchewan	59	\$5,154,769
Yukon	8	\$1,219,772
Total	354	\$38,199,472

Source: Program Operations Branch (POB), ESDC

ISC

In 2022 to 2023, ISC provided \$32.8 million in Minor Capital funding towards IELCC Minor Capital initiatives, including \$9.05 million to the BC First Nations Health Authority to support repair and renovation projects for AHSOR sites in BC, \$4.1 million to regions to facilitate the completion of AHSOR programming surveys and building condition assessments as applicable, \$3.9 million towards 35 repair and renovation projects, and \$15.7 million towards 16 replacement projects. Results from the Building Condition Assessments identified the limited demand and costs associated with repairs and renovations in contrast to the significant demand for building replacements.

As of September 8, 2023, ISC had allocated \$26.9 million towards IELCC Minor Capital Initiatives for the fiscal year 2023 to 2024, including \$9.05 million to the BC First Nations Health Authority to support repair and renovation projects for AHSOR sites in BC, \$4.05 million towards repair and renovation projects and \$13.8 million towards 15 replacement projects, of which 14 were initiated in 2022 to 2023.

³⁴ The Repairs and Renovations actual expenditures for the fiscal year 2022 to 2023 are the amounts expended by ESDC as of February 1, 2023.

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Table 4: Actual expenditure by ISC for Minor Capital and Repairs, by region for 2022 to 2023

Region	Actual expenditure
Atlantic Provinces	\$ 380,010
Quebec	\$ 4,020,000
Ontario	\$ 980,000
Manitoba	\$ 761,175
Saskatchewan	\$ 11,084,360
Alberta	\$ 6,458,868
British Columbia	\$ 9,052,800
Total	\$ 32,737,213

Source: Indigenous Services Canada

PHAC

The overview of the PHAC approach on urgent repairs and renovations funding (2022 to 2023) under AHSUNC noted that they undertook a 2 phased “hybrid” approach.

Phase 1 of the approach included launching a national call for proposals for urgent capital needs, while Phase 2 involved undertaking a process to develop a Capital Needs Assessment and Long-Term Capital Plan. PHAC received a total of \$8.3M in minor capital funding requests from 47 recipients (representing 59% of AHSUNC recipients). Many of these requests (74%) were linked to ensuring programming is being offered in an environment that meets health and safety requirements.

Supporting federal commitments to Truth and Reconciliation Commissions’ Calls to Action

Most internal federal key informants (21 out of 27) indicated that they perceived that the Initiative is making progress towards supporting government’s commitments in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action #12 35 and Indigenous ELCC principles. Within this statement of progress, there was also the consensus among respondents that there was room for the Initiative to further support these principles while recognizing the diversity across the distinction groups and Nations.

The 2022 evaluation of AHSUNC indicated that the Program has been described as “reconciliation in action”. This description is due to it being a program that is Indigenous-led and directly supports several of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ’s Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

³⁵ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action #12 states that “We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families.”

Coordinated federal support for Indigenous ELCC

Summary of findings

The evaluation found some evidence that the Initiative is contributing to increased collaboration and coordination of federal Indigenous ELCC investments. This increase helps advance the vision and priorities of Indigenous partners as outlined in the co-developed 2018 Indigenous ELCC Framework.

The 2024 HCD evaluation noted that the effectiveness of this Program has increased over time with additional new Indigenous ELCC investments. These investments helped to address underinvestment, increase coverage, and expand program scope in community.

Various coordination mechanisms have been implemented such as the Director General Interdepartmental Committee and a Federal Working Group on Reporting which meets on a monthly basis.

While progress was identified, there remain areas for improvement including streamlining of funding for Indigenous ELCC.

Coordinating federal investments

One of the purposes of the Initiative is to enable horizontal coordination of federal investments in Indigenous ELCC, including the use of new and existing program resources to advance shared priorities, with the end goal of transferring Indigenous ELCC to Indigenous control. The Horizontal Terms and Conditions are designed to support horizontal coordination of federal investments in Indigenous ELCC, including the legacy programs and funding transferred to Self-Governing Nations or those wanting to assume jurisdiction for Indigenous ELCC. A review of the Horizontal Terms and Conditions confirm that they provide flexibility to facilitate horizontal coordination. Upon the direction of the funding recipient, federal departments (ESDC, ISC, CIRNAC and PHAC) can:

- 1) transfer resources to recipients using the established governance structure for decision making
- 2) transfer approved funding under their existing programming to a partner department, or
- 3) maintain their direct relationship with recipients and transfer funding through their existing programming to support the Indigenous ELCC Framework or associated Indigenous ELCC priorities or plans.

From the internal documents reviewed, there is evidence of active mechanisms that have been developed and implemented that support collaboration and coordination of the federal investments and initiatives regarding Indigenous ELCC. The 2024 HCD evaluation noted that the effectiveness of this Program (HCD) has increased over time with additional new Indigenous ELCC investments. These investments helped to address underinvestment, increase coverage, and expand program scope in communities.

As mentioned previously, the governance of the horizontal Initiative includes an Assistant Deputy Minister Steering Committee, the Director General Interdepartmental Committee, and a Federal Working Group on Reporting. The Director General Interdepartmental Committee typically hold meetings on a monthly basis. The Committee's meeting agendas include:

- presentations of workplans, to endorse and implement funding decisions across federal departments,
- opportunities to further coordinate across the legacy programs,

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- overviews of successes,
- progress reporting, and
- preliminary results achieved by the Initiative.

Interviews with internal respondents pointed to varied perspectives on the level of coordination and collaboration achieved across departments regarding Indigenous ELCC. Some internal respondents (8 out of 27) reported that they had observed progress being made regarding increased federal collaboration to advance funding for the legacy programs and for the various investment streams as compared to the level of collaboration that was observed at the onset of the Initiative.

The perceived slow pace of streamlining the Indigenous ELCC funding process was noted by some internal respondents (10 out of 27) as a challenge to the efficacy of the collaboration effort. Some internal respondents (9 out of 27) noted that greater transparency with Indigenous partners on streamlining and considerations associated with different funding mechanisms and internal federal deadlines was needed to facilitate the process. The internal document review found evidence that the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat has been working on defining and weighing various options and approaches towards streamlining taking into account the feedback from Indigenous partners. The Indigenous ELCC Secretariat is working to streamline the administration of funding agreements across departments, where requested and as directed by Indigenous partners such as the Métis Nation in British Columbia and the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations.

Facilitating administrative streamlining of Inuit ELCC funding

Upon receiving direction from Inuit partners, ESDC has worked with PHAC and Service Canada to streamline funding agreements. For example, based on direction from the Nunatsiavut Government, ESDC worked with federal partners to move from advancing funding through two separate funding agreements (that is, for Indigenous ELCC, AHSUNC and FNICCI funding) to advancing these funds through a single CIRNAC managed fiscal transfer agreement, which aligns with Nunatsiavut's Self-Governing agreement. In doing so, this also supported alignment with federal commitments to streamline agreements under the Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative and more specifically Government of Canada commitments to Self-Governing Indigenous Governments on the use of Fiscal Financing Agreements, where applicable.

In addition to agreement streamlining efforts with Nunatsiavut Government, ESDC has worked with PHAC and Service Canada to streamline funding agreements for the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, advancing Indigenous ELCC, AHSUNC and FNICCI funding through a single ESDC agreement. Before this agreement, Inuvialuit Regional Corporation received Federal Indigenous ELCC funding from PHAC and ESDC respectively, along with separate data and performance reporting requirements. Streamlining the funding agreement permitted channeling of four streams of funds through one department in an Indigenous ELCC specific agreement to the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, including simplified data and program performance reporting through the provision of one report to the federal government and streamlined use of reporting indicators.

Conclusion

The Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative aims to support the implementation of the co-developed Indigenous ELCC Framework, which was jointly released in September 2018 by the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Métis National Council and the Government of Canada.

This report presents the findings of the Phase 1 horizontal evaluation of the Initiative covering the period from fiscal years 2018 to 2019 through 2022 to 2023. This first evaluation of the Initiative was formative in scope.

Key findings

Through both its design and implementation, the Initiative has contributed to fostering Indigenous influence and decision-making for their ELCC programs and services.

While progress has been made in this area, there are additional opportunities and potential for development that have not yet been fully realized with considerable variability in progress between and across distinctions, communities, and regions.

Identified contributing factors to Indigenous influence and decision making included the increased flexibility within its horizontal Terms and Conditions, leveraging of legacy funding to produce greater horizontality across ELCC programs and services, ongoing development of partnership tables, and movement towards a distinction-based approach.

Identified challenges hindering Indigenous influence and decision making included federal fiscal calendar and federal funding timelines that did not fully recognize the processes involved in effective engagement. These challenges do not include nor reflect the perspectives from off reserve, off territory and urban Indigenous communities. Other challenges found through the evaluation also included: partnership development and capacity building, delays with funding, insufficient funding amounts and lack of transparency with the distinction-based federal funding formulas and allocation, as well as the effects of COVID-19.

While the evaluation gathered limited findings largely due the lack of distinction specific performance information, some documented examples point to the Initiative having contributed to improvements in quality, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility to Indigenous ELCC.

The AHSUNC and HCD evaluations found strong evidence that the Program is contributing to improvements in both the quality and cultural appropriateness of Indigenous ELCC.

The HCD evaluation noted the following key accomplishments within the AHSOR program as described by community representatives including a) strengthened connection to culture and positive identity; b) improved school readiness; and; c) the development of trusting relationships with children and families, and achievement of emotional and developmental milestones.

The HCD evaluation found that AHSOR programs are operating with a holistic approach to supporting child development including integration of Nation-based culture and language activities, play based learning, health promotion, nutritious food access, and involvement of parents. However, it also found that the capacity to deliver effective programming is limited by poor infrastructure and stagnant funding against community changes (for example, population growth and increasing needs).

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Specific examples from interviews with Indigenous partners and the document review point to the Initiative contributing to improvements in the areas of language preservation efforts, building confidence in participants' own cultures and identities, cultural connectedness activities, culturally appropriate training for ELCC workers, and partnership and governance activities to coordinate and collaborate across organizations.

Of the 32 funded QIP about one third were completed while the remaining were nearing completion at the time of this evaluation. At this stage of the Initiative and given that the majority of the Quality Improvement Projects are nearing completion, there is limited information on the extent to which completed projects improved the quality or cultural appropriateness of Indigenous ELCC.

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on the delivery and accessibility of ELCC services in Indigenous communities.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been substantial for many Indigenous communities. It has severely disrupted many of the Indigenous-led planning and implementation activities. Moreover, child care centres were closed, and families still required supports. This also impacted the social and emotional development of children. There was a need to pivot and provide various supports including online activities, home-based kits, outdoor check-ins as well as food hampers.

The Initiative has contributed to improving collaboration and coordination of federal investments and initiatives related to Indigenous ELCC.

Various coordination mechanisms have been implemented such as the Director General Interdepartmental Committee which meets monthly, and a Federal Working Group on Reporting. While progress was identified, there remain areas for improvement such as further defining responsibilities among federal partners and additional efforts at streamlining of funding for Indigenous ELCC.

Observations

Given the formative scope of the report, this evaluation puts forward observations rather than recommendations. The 2 proposed observations stemming from the evaluation are as follows:

1. Ongoing work with Indigenous partners on performance measurement and data for the Initiative.

The evaluation found that an interim performance measurement strategy is in place that includes 8 interim indicators. However, the evaluation found data collection and interpretation challenges on these indicators across all federal partners. These challenges were exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The evaluation also found that initial work has been undertaken by the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat to understand the current available data sources, potential baseline measures, and indicators that could be adapted or further developed. This is with the aim to participate in the co-development of distinction-based results frameworks with Indigenous partners. The current work undertaken points to the importance of working with Indigenous partners in the spirit of Reconciliation, taking into account differences across distinctions, and building appropriate data collection infrastructure.

2. Considerations around streamlining the Initiative.

One of the key objectives underlying the early implementation of the Initiative was improved federal coordination as a first step to transferring full control of ELCC programs

and services to Indigenous Peoples. This was facilitated through a number of strategies including the creation of horizontal Terms and Conditions for funding and the leveraging of existing legacy funding agreements. Based on perspectives from Indigenous partners, the evaluation found that improved federal coordination has contributed to fostering Indigenous influence over ELCC. However, the evaluation also found that federal changes have resulted in challenges in the areas of communication on roles and responsibilities and in terms of the efficacy of collaboration efforts amongst all partners. In addition, the evidence from the evaluation noted issues around timeliness of funding allocations and decisions for Indigenous organizations which has resulted in challenges in the delivery of ELCC services for some Indigenous organizations. These suggest that the federal partners of the Initiative could explore measures to simplify and streamline internal processes and decision making as it continues to mature and progress towards the vision of full transfer to Indigenous Peoples.

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Annex A: Description of Legacy Programs

First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI)

- Administered by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)
- Provides full-time, year-round childcare to First Nations on reserve and Inuit children up to age 12, including after-school care. In many northern communities, FNICCI is the only program offering childcare
- Funding is accessed through contribution agreements, administered through ESDC's Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program service delivery network
- Subsidizes childcare spaces; fees are based on parents' ability to pay and are consistent with community practice and values, and
- Programming provides 11,563 spaces, in 461 centres (58 First Nation organization, and 6 Inuit organizations) through centre based and home-based full and part-time childcare.

Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR)

- Administered by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)
- Offers half-day programming focused on early learning and child development, including early intervention and screening for developmental difficulties. The program is built on 6 components (for example, culture and language, education, health promotion, nutrition, social support, and parent and family involvement.) that are linked to community needs
- Available only for First Nations children living on-reserve aged 0 to 6
- Delivered in British Columbia by the First Nations Health Authority
- Funding is accessed through broad community-based contribution agreements, as part of the suite of community health programming funded by ISC's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch. Within the Ontario region, funding for AHSOR is part of a "program cluster" for Healthy Child Development that also includes programming for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, and Maternal Child Health, and
- Programming is offered through half-day centre-based programming, outreach or home-visiting, or a combination of the 2.

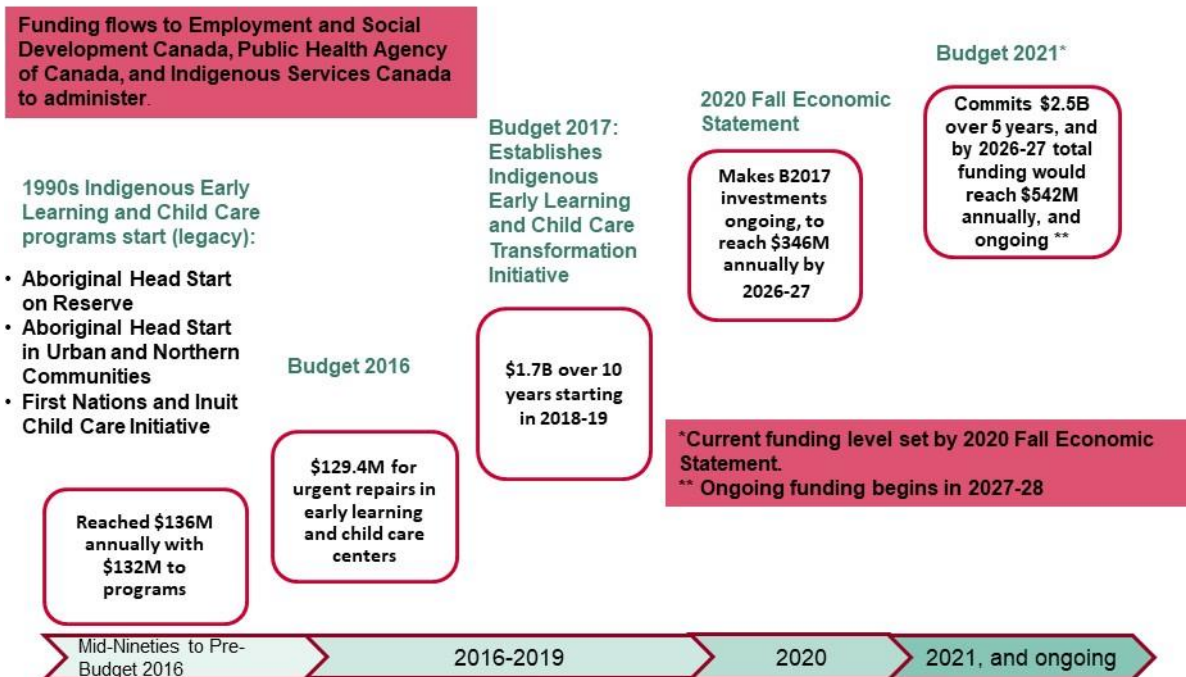
Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC)

- Administered by the Public Health Agency of Canada
- Similar to the AHSOR program in design but is delivered off reserve in urban and northern communities and is available to First Nations living off reserve, Inuit and Métis children aged 0 to 6
- Funding is accessed through Contribution Agreements held with child care centres, and
- Programming reaches 4,600 children (80% between ages of 3 to 5); 53% First Nations; 19% Métis; and 19% Inuit in 134 sites through half day centre based programming, outreach or home visiting, or a combination of the 2.

Annex B: Federal Investments in Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care

Figure 1: Federal Investments in Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care

Federal Investments in Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care



Annex C: Indigenous ELCC Funding Streams under the Initiative

Federally-led Funding Streams

In addition to the ongoing implementation of Legacy program funding, and the new investments into programs and services, partnership and governance and the Transformative Action Fund, two other streams of funding were also administered during the first five years of the Initiative. These two streams represent a small percentage of total funding under the Initiative.

Quality Improvement Projects (QIP)

The Quality Improvement Projects funding envelope is administered centrally by ESDC. Funding is allocated through calls for proposals. In 2019, a solicited call for proposals was held for Quality Improvement Projects for fiscal years 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021. In February 2021, ESDC launched a subsequent open call for proposals for fiscal years 2021 to 2022 and 2022 to 2023 with themes identified by Indigenous partners. To date, ESDC has invested a total of \$4.12 million across 13 projects from the first 2019 call for proposals, and a total of 9.25 million across 19 projects from the February 2021 call for proposals. A third call for proposals was launched in January 2023 to allocate Quality Improvement Projects funding over fiscal years 2023 to 2024 through 2025 to 2026. Open, application based call for proposal processes provide opportunities for more Indigenous organizations and recipients to access funding.

Urgent repairs and renovations

For the first three years of funding (from 2022 to 2023 through 2024 to 2025) for repairs and renovations, federal departments are leading the delivery of funding to existing ELCC facilities. This approach was taken to expedite cash flow for urgent projects. The annual allocation of \$80 million over 2022 to 2023 through 2024 to 2025 was allocated proportionally to ESDC for agreements with FNICCI service delivery organizations (\$36.2 million), ISC for AHSOR centres (\$32.8 million) and to PHAC for AHSUNC agreement holders (\$10.4 million). Each department has its own intake process to meet ELCC standards in health, safety, and accessibility. ESDC solicited proposals from FNICCI recipients. AHSOR funding was allocated through a needs-based prioritization exercise that focused on health and safety. Initial repair and renovation projects were brought forward through regional offices based on their knowledge of minor infrastructure needs within communities. Funding was also allocated to undertake programming surveys and building condition assessments.

PHAC worked with the National Aboriginal Head Start Council to facilitate decision making for allocation of funds through AHSUNC. Year one of this funding was administered within the period covered by this evaluation.

This section below provides an overview of the envelopes and streams of funding for Indigenous ELCC under the Initiative.

- **Programs and services funding** is identified to improve and increase availability, quality, and cultural appropriateness of ELCC services and programs. The Initiative's horizontal Terms and Conditions provides broad flexibility for Indigenous leadership to direct spending on areas such as salaries, operations, capital, development of early childhood educator curriculum, professional development, or other ELCC priorities.

- **Transformative action funds** are a specific set amount within the Programs and Services stream of funding which enables strategic investments on priorities such as governance capacity development and supporting the transfer of the funding and delivery to regional ELCC authorities and governance bodies.
- **Partnerships and governance** (also referred to as Governance and Capacity) funding enables Indigenous-led decision making and strengthened ELCC capacity. Funding under this stream can be directed to areas such as management and technical staff, dialogue and planning, IT systems development, evaluation, action-research, pilots, regional and national learning and exchange, and liaison with provincial and territorial governments.
- **Urgent repairs and renovation funding** serves to repair and renovate existing Indigenous ELCC centres. The years 2022 to 2023, 2023 to 2024 and 2024 to 2025 were federally administered and prioritized to existing legacy programming (AHSOR, AHSUNC and FNICCI sites). Beginning in year 4 (2025 to 2026) this funding will shift to Distinctions-Based Envelopes.
- **Major infrastructure funding** are intended to support the building and maintenance of new Indigenous ELCC centres in additional communities. The roll out of this funding] stream begins in 2023 to 2024. Horizontal coordination efforts to design, determine the implementation approach and access the funding were underway during the undertaking of the evaluation. This stream of investments is out of scope for the evaluation.
- **Quality improvement projects** aim to advance the vision and goals of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework through research and innovation. Quality Improvement Projects help to identify best practices, models, and innovations which can be adapted for use in other communities or Indigenous early learning and child care settings and help ensure that First Nations, Inuit and Métis children have the opportunities in the early years to succeed in the future. The following themes were co-developed with Indigenous partners and were used for the Quality Improvement Projects Calls for Proposals held in 2021 and 2023:
 - defining what high-quality Indigenous ELCC means to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis
 - finding ways to support ongoing education and training for Indigenous ELCC leaders, Management, and staff,
 - building and strengthening local Indigenous ELCC licensing rules and procedures, and
 - making tools and training that support Indigenous ELCC staff who work with children with special needs.

The Table below outlines the funding streams and their characteristics. “Partnership Model” refers to the joint management of envelopes by First Nations, Inuit and Métis leadership and the Government as outlined above. “Federally directed” refers to funding streams where the Government administered streams of funding more directly.

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Note: Budget 2021 added a 3% annual escalator to all permanent and ongoing funding streams under Indigenous ELCC³⁶.

Table 5: IELCC Funding Streams

Funding stream	First funded in (fiscal year)	Subsequently enhanced in	Made permanent and ongoing in	Delivery model
Programs and Services	2018 to 2019	2020 Fall Economic Statement, and Budget 2021	Fall Economic Statement 2020	Partnership Model
Transformative Action Fund (TAF)	2022 to 2023	Not applicable	Fall Economic Statement 2020	Partnership Model
Governance and Partnerships	2018 to 2019	2020 Fall Economic Statement and Budget 2021	Fall Economic Statement 2020	Partnership Model
COVID-19	2020 to 2021	Not applicable	not applicable	Partnership Model
Urgent Repairs and Renovations (Minor Capital)	2022 to 2023	Not applicable	Budget 2021	Federally-directed for 2022 to 2023 and 2024 to 2025 Partnership Model as of 2025 to 2026
Major Infrastructure	2023 to 2024	Not applicable	Budget 2021	Partnership Model
Quality Improvement Projects	2019 to 2020	2020 Fall Economic Statement	Budget 2021	Federally-directed
Legacy Programs	Mid 1990's	Budget 2017 and also Budget 2021 for AHSUNC	Mid 1990's	Partnership Model as of 2018 to 2019

³⁶ The 3% escalator, committed under Budget 2021 applies to all funding advanced under the Transformation Initiative with the exception of the one-time COVID funding and funding the ISC administered Before and After School Care program. This program is not reflected in this table, nor in this evaluation.

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Annex D: Planned IELCC grants and contributions

Table 6: Planned expenditures for Legacy programs

(\$millions)	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
AHSOR (Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve)	41.5	41.5	41.5	41.5	41.5	207.5
AHSUNC (Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities)	29.1	29.1	29.1	29.1	29.1	145.5
FNICCI (First Nations and Inuit Early Learning and Child Care)	55.0	55.0	55.0	55.0	55.0	275.0
Total legacy funding***	125.6	125.6	125.6	125.6	125.6	628.0

Notes:

*** Annual totals do consider Annual Reference Level Update transfers but the annual totals do not reflect in year transfers or reprofiles

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC

Table 7: Planned IELCC expenditures for First Nations Envelope

(\$millions)	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
Budget 2017 First Nations Envelope (including 10% Partnerships and Governance)	72.5	72.5	72.5	72.5	103.2	393.2
Transformative Action Fund	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	5.0	5.0
COVID 19 Economic Response Plan	not applicable	not applicable	71.0	not applicable	not applicable	71.0
2020 Fall Economic Statement Program and Services	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	46.5	not applicable	46.5
2020 Fall Economic Statement Governance	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	4.8	4.8	9.6
Budget 2021 Program and Services	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	105.9	105.9
Budget 2021 Governance	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	17.3	17.3	34.6
Total First Nations Envelope***	72.5	72.5	143.5	141.1	236.2	665.8

Notes:

*** Annual totals do consider annual reference level update transfers but the annual totals do not reflect in year transfers or reprofiles

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC

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Table 8: Planned IELCC expenditures for the Inuit Envelope

(\$millions)	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
Budget 2017 Inuit Envelope (including 10% Partnerships and Governance)	5.7	5.7	5.7	5.7	8.1	30.9
Remoteness Adjustment and Transformative Action Fund*	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	5.0	8.0
COVID 19 Economic Response Plan	not applicable	not applicable	10.9	not applicable	not applicable	10.9
2020 Fall Economic Statement Program & Services	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	5.8	not applicable	5.8
2020 Fall Economic Statement Governance	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	0.6	0.6	1.2
Budget 2021 Program and Services	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	13.2	13.2
Budget 2021 Governance	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	2.2	2.2	4.4
Total Inuit Funding Envelope***	6.5	6.5	17.45	15.1	29.1	74.6

Notes:

*** Annual totals do consider annual reference level update transfers but the annual totals do not reflect in year transfers or reprofiles

Source: Chief Financial Operation Branch, ESDC

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Table 9: Planned IELCC expenditures for the Métis Nation Envelope

(\$millions)	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
Budget 2017 Métis Nation Envelope (including 10% Partnerships and Governance)	27.3	27.3	27.3	27.3	38.9	148.1
Start Up Fund and Transformative Action Fund	12.0	12.0	12.0	12.0	5.0	53.0
COVID 19 Economic Response Plan	not applicable	not applicable	29.9	not applicable	not applicable	29.9
2020 Fall Economic Statement Program and Services	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	20.3	not applicable	20.3
2020 Fall Economic Statement Governance	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	2.1	2.1	4.2
Budget 2021 Program and Services	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	46.3	46.3
Budget 2021 Governance	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	7.5	7.5	15.0
Total Métis nation funding envelope***	39.3	39.3	69.2	69.2	99.8	316.8

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC

Notes:

*** Annual totals do consider annual reference level update transfers but the annual totals do not reflect in year transfers or reprofiles

Table 10: Planned IELCC expenditures for Other Investments

(\$millions)	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total***
Quality Improvement Projects Budget 2017	1.3	1.3	2.3	3.3	6.0	14.0
Pan Indigenous Programming (PHAC) Budget 2017	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	4.0	14.0
COVID 19 Economic Response Plan	not applicable	not applicable	8.2	not applicable	not applicable	8.2
Pan Indigenous Programming (PHAC) Budget 2021	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	2.4	10.5	12.9
Before and After School Care (BASC)	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	67.0	112.0	179.0
Budget 2021 Repairs and Renovations	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	80.0	80.0

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC

Notes:

*** Annual totals do consider annual reference level update transfers but the annual totals do not reflect in year transfers or reprofiles

Table 11: Planned IELCC expenditures by Department

(\$millions)	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023	Total
ESDC	49.2	58.4	120.5	131.9	246.2	606.3
ISC	70.3	59.8	109.8	162.8	305.4	708.1
PHAC	2.5	3.8	12.7	5.7	26.1	50.8
Grand Total ***	122.0	122.0	243.0	300.5	577.7	1,365.2

Source: Chief Financial Officer Branch, ESDC

Notes:

*** Annual totals do consider annual reference level update transfers but the annual totals do not reflect in year transfers or reprofiles

Annex E: Evaluation questions and evaluation methods

Introduction

The following presents the methodologies used for the Evaluation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Initiative. This Annex describes the scope of the evaluation, data sources, data collection methods and constraints and limitations.

Scope and breadth

This evaluation is formative and encompasses the period between 2018 to 2019 and 2022 to 2023. It focused on the issues and questions identified below and the evaluation is national in scope. The following evaluation questions were covered as part of this evaluation.

1. To what extent is the Transformation Initiative's partnership model implemented and operated in a way that fosters Indigenous influence and decision making in the design and delivery of Indigenous ELCC programs and services?
2. How is the Transformation Initiative contributing to improvements in the quality, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility of Indigenous ELCC services for Indigenous families and communities?
3. To what extent has federal support for Indigenous ELCC been more coordinated since the inception of the Transformation Initiative?

Methodologies

The following methods were used to respond to the evaluation questions.

1. **Document, file and literature review:** This included previous evaluation final reports, literature, available program documentation, data and project files provided by the program. A total of approximately 60 documents were reviewed as part of this review (including among other things documented success stories, the Evaluation of the AHSUNC Program by PHAC, AHSOR by ISC, and the Mid Term Evaluation of the Inuit Early Learning and Child Care Framework by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. The systematic review consisted of developing a review grid according to the evaluation questions and specific indicators as outlined in the Methodology Report for this evaluation. The indicators selected for the evaluation are a mix of both quantitative and qualitative indicators. This review serves as 1 line of evidence for the evaluation.
2. **Administrative data:** An analysis of the financial data for the program was conducted for planned and actual expenditures for the program years 2018 to 2019 through 2022 to 2023.
3. **Key informant interviews:** Key informant interviews with internal and external partners were conducted based on the contacts provided by the Program Operations Branch of Service Canada – the administrative arm of the funding agreements for ESDC and the Indigenous ELCC Secretariat using a purposeful and a snowball sampling³⁷ methodology. In addition, a snowball approach was used to conduct these interviews.

³⁷ The snowballing sampling is an approach for identifying key informants. The initial set of key informants provided referral of subject matter experts in the program resulting in a chain of recommended key informants.

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- **Internal with Government of Canada officials** from the ESDC, PHAC, ISC, and CIRNAC (27 respondents).
- **External with Indigenous partners**³⁸ : Métis (11 interviews) and First Nations (9 interviews) partners. In addition, 2 additional representatives from First Nations submitted written responses for a total of 11 First Nations responses. The Assembly of First Nations shared a written response for the evaluation documenting viewpoints and perspectives on key evaluation issues.³⁹ Key informant interviews were not conducted with Inuit representatives to avoid duplication with the evaluation that Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami was undertaking in parallel on Inuit early learning and childcare.

Analysis

- The data analysis **strategy** included the triangulation of various lines of evidence.

³⁸ Note that the external key informant interviews were a combination of group and individual interviews.

³⁹ The response is attributed to the perspectives shared by the Assembly of First Nations' National Expert Working Group members, as well as Assembly of First Nations' own experience in collaborating with the IELCC Secretariat on this Initiative; the Assembly of First Nations shared the perspectives that were raised by the National Expert Working Group and provided these as the chair of the National Expert Working Group.

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Annex F: Actual expenditures for AHSUNC and IELCC

Table 12: Actual Expenditures for AHSUNC

	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023
Legacy: AHSUNC	29,496,989	28,117,692	30,601,961	30,409,547	29,705,302
Total AHSUNC Actual Spending	29,496,989	28,117,692	30,601,961	30,409,547	29,705,302

Source: Public Health Agency of Canada

Table 13: Actual Expenditures for IELCC by PHAC

	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023
Budget 2017	2,632,395	4,969,001	4,574,092	3,395,150	4,489,320
Fall Economic Statement 2020	not applicable	not applicable	not previously reported ⁴⁰	60,308	2,455,762 ⁴¹
Budget 2021 – Service Transformation	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	9,193,158
Budget 2021 – Repairs & Renovation	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	7,187,066
COVID-19 Emergency Response Funding (Actual)	not applicable	not applicable	8,216,080	not applicable	not applicable
Total IELCC Actual spending	2,632,395	4,969,001	12,790,172	3,455,458	23,325,306

Source: Public Health Agency of Canada

⁴⁰ Note that this was not reported, as the funding from Fall Economic Statement 2020 began only in 2021 to 2022.

⁴¹ The Reprofile of \$2.4 million to Fiscal year 2022 to 2023 was received in year, but not included in Planned amount. There was also a supplementary C transfer of \$278,400 to CIRNAC.

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Annex G: Actual Expenditures for AHSOR and IELCC

Table 14: Actual Expenditures for AHSOR

	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023
Legacy- AHSOR	38,972,515	29,644,438	25,706,511	25,890,343	26,161,099
Total AHSOR Actual Spending	38,972,515	29,644,438	25,706,511	25,890,343	26,161,099

Source: Indigenous Services Canada

Note: These do not include the CIRNAC 2022 to 2023 actual expenditure numbers provided in Table 1 as part of the overall total for 2022 to 2023 above.

Table 15: Actual Expenditures for IELCC by ISC

	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023
Budget 2017	69,431,610	60,220,113	57,155,576	49,574,374	63,705,599
Fall Economic Statement 2020	not applicable	not applicable	not reported ⁴²	23,182,587	3,795,384
Budget 2021: Service Transformation	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	75,013,071	215,621,110
Budget 2021: Repairs and Renovation	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	32,737,213
COVID-19 Emergency Response Funding (Actual)	not applicable	not applicable	48,116,655	not applicable	not applicable
Total IELCC Actual spending	not applicable	60,220,113	105,272,231	147,770,032	315,859,306

Source: Indigenous Services Canada

Note: These do not include the CIRNAC 2022 to 2023 actual expenditure numbers provided in Table 1 as part of the overall total for 2022 to 2023 above.

⁴² Note that this was not reported, as the funding from the Fall Economic Statement 2020 began only in 2021 to 2022.

Annex H: Findings from the Mid Term Evaluation of the Inuit Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Framework

Relevance: alignment with needs

The Inuit ELCC Framework is viewed as aspirational, expressing clear expectations and objectives, and is adaptable and flexible. As such, the Inuit ELCC Framework is as relevant today as it was when it was developed, and will continue to be so in the future. The Framework remains largely reflective of the needs of Inuit children, families, and communities.

The Inuit ELCC Framework is viewed as largely reflective of the needs of Inuit children, families, and communities in Inuit regions and urban centres outside Inuit Nunangat, and as such is still relevant and is expected to become even more so in the future. This is particularly the case as ELCC becomes more prominent given the increased attention and investment by federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments seeking to establish a modern, accessible and effective ELCC system across Canada.

For these governments, the Inuit ELCC Framework is a direct reflection of what ELCC looks like for Inuit, what it means to Inuit, and establishes measurable goals and priorities. Government of Canada respondents stated that the Inuit ELCC Framework serves as a guide for federal policy, has been endorsed by Cabinet and at the highest level of the Government of Canada, is consistent with the Inuit Nunangat Policy, and is directly shaping the implementation of the Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative. It is also being recognized more broadly as a useful guide for the provinces and territories.

While respondents from Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Inuit Land Claims Organizations and other Inuit organizations agreed that the Inuit ELCC Framework remains largely reflective of the needs of Inuit children, families and communities, there was general agreement that ELCC could be improved by supporting Inuit children and families residing in urban areas outside Inuit Nunangat. Respondents observed that IELCC improvement to date has focussed on those systems within Inuit Nunangat, with less attention given to the needs of Inuit children residing outside the Inuit homeland who are facing disparities in needs compared to their counterparts in Inuit Nunangat. This is a somewhat complicated situation given that urban Inuit organizations do not have land claim affiliations.

Going forward, there is consensus that support to urban Inuit should be a priority for action, particularly given the trend of Inuit leaving small communities for large urban centres. This is expected to be a challenge as Inuit Land Claims Organizations and the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group have not navigated the ELCC needs of urban Inuit children, women and families previously. Given this, and that there are few designated representatives of the needs

The Inuit ELCC Framework could benefit from an update and the preparation of a detailed implementation plan, consisting of specific actions at the Inuit Nunangat level. Supporting the needs of Inuit children and families residing outside Inuit Nunangat (Priority 8) is a pressing need that could benefit from national action.

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or urban Inuit with the exception of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Pauktuutit, respondents noted that it has been difficult to bring this issue forward.⁴³

Funding levels were not viewed by Inuit Land Claims Organizations and other Inuit organizations as adequate to stabilize the ELCC sector, particularly in the difficult post-COVID context, and meet the needs of Inuit regions and urban centres outside Inuit Nunangat. Addressing human resource capacity (Priority 5 of the Inuit ELCC Framework) and infrastructure deficits (Priority 6) were the most commonly raised areas for improvement. Impactful upstream systems change has remained a challenge.

Similarly, the impact and role of women in ELCC (for example, as primary caregivers and ELCC workers) was reported as largely absent from the Inuit ELCC Framework (and ELCC in the provinces and territories). An acknowledgement of this in a gender specific update to the Inuit ELCC Framework, and associated programs and funding, was urged.

Among respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations, there was a general expectation expressed that the quality of the Inuit Nunangat ELCC system would be comparable to those of the provinces and territories. While all respondents, representing Inuit and the federal government, were in agreement that there has been a collective commitment to effect change, an ongoing frustration among many respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and other Inuit organizations is a view that the Government of Canada does not adequately appreciate the practical realities across Inuit Nunangat and how things get done (although this has improved recently). Given this, funding levels were not viewed by Inuit Land Claims Organizations as adequate to meet the needs of Inuit regions or urban centres outside Inuit Nunangat. These respondents observed that Government of Canada funding formulas based on the relative population of each distinctions group did not consider the needs of and challenges faced by communities in Inuit Nunangat (for example, infrastructure needs are markedly different than in southern Canada). In some regions, child care programs are closed during the summer months due to resource constraints. In one case, it was reported that even despite this measure, funding remained inadequate.

It was also noted by some respondents that, despite the newly available resources for Inuit ELCC, upstream systems change was not being made. Rather, the conversation, for example at the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group, was still very much operational, focussed on regions and individual projects. Respondents interviewed for this evaluation, however, raised several needs—many similar to those expressed in the Inuit ELCC Framework—that were more focussed on upstream systems change. Particular prominence was given to needs related capacity, as further discussed below.

Ensuring early childhood educator professional development, training and education is available and accessible for those interested

Hiring and retaining early childhood educators is a well-known challenge reported by child care centres across Inuit Nunangat and throughout Canada. Aurora College, Nunavut Arctic College and the College of the North Atlantic offer early childhood educator diploma and certificate programs, as well as individual courses. Programming is designed to be flexible and accessible.

⁴³ In 2021, the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group commissioned research examining the IELCC needs of urban Inuit.

For example, the Nunavik model of educating early childhood educators includes incentives to stay in home communities, and flexibility on how and where education and professional development is offered.

Aurora College's 2 year ELCC Diploma program can be taken full-time onsite or part-time through distance learning, the latter intended to meet the needs of working early learning professionals. Nunavut Arctic College's early childhood educator Diploma is a 2 year program, while the early childhood educator Applied Certificate program offers onsite training through a series of intensive, 3 week accredited courses, available in Rankin Inlet, Arviat, Coral Harbour and Iqaluit.⁴⁴ College of the North Atlantic's early childhood educator Diploma is a 2 year program, while the early childhood educator Certificate is a one-year program. The Nunatsiavut Government and College of the North Atlantic has also provided on-site training in Nain, supported by Inuit ELCC Framework funding. A College of the North Atlantic instructor was deployed for 2 years and 8 early childhood educator workers were certified (early childhood educator Credential Level 1).

Some respondents observed that, despite these educational and professional development opportunities, there are waiting lists for programs, and there remains an insufficiency of early childhood educators to meet the needs of Inuit Nunangat. One respondent noted that there are disincentives for those seeking early childhood educator education outside of their home communities (for example, in the Northwest Territories, leaving the community may mean the loss of scarce parental rental housing), and for those who do obtain early childhood educator qualifications, there are disincentives to return (for example, a new application for housing is required, and if approved, there is a long waiting list).

Recruitment and retention of staff

Recruitment and retention of staff, for frontline, administration and management roles, remains a perennial issue across Inuit Nunangat, and is not restricted to ELCC. Some progress is being made in increasing salaries and benefits for early childhood educators, but many child care centres are reportedly even worse off than pre-COVID, with some centres closing in the face of widespread staffing challenges.

For example, some respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations noted that when staff obtain professional early childhood educator qualifications they become more mobile in the labour market, sometimes moving to other employers offering more competitive compensation packages (for example, the public school system, territorial governments). Consequently, the need to recruit, train and retain staff is an ongoing requirement, as is mentoring and succession planning. These needs can be complicated by a number of provincial or territorial government departments, as well as unions, that can be involved in ELCC staffing and establishing child care centres. In some regions, however, IELCC funding has enabled development of improved pay scales and more competitive compensation packages which has helped improve retention (for example, introduction of a wage grid by Kativik Regional Government).

In some communities, childcare staff are viewed as babysitters, rather than professionals in their own right, which can impact recruitment. Some respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations

⁴⁴ Nunavut Arctic College's early childhood educator Diploma program was not offered in 2021 to 2022 pending a review of the College's early childhood educator programs. The diploma program was re-introduced for the 2022 to 2023 school year at Nunavut Arctic College's Iqaluit campus. The college also offers an early childhood educator Certificate Program that is delivered on-site at childcare centres in 2 communities in 2022 to 2023, Arviat and Igloodik.

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raised the need to change social values so the role child care workers fulfil are recognized and valued by communities.

Respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations also noted the pressing need for administration and management staff given the number of programs being delivered. This is expected to become more pronounced as Inuit Land Claims Organizations start to address the requirements of urban Inuit across Canada.

Access to culturally appropriate Inuit specific curricula and Inuktit speakers

Cultural programs include language nests, storytelling, drum dancing, and cultural and traditional games, which ideally involve Inuktit speakers to build fluency in both children and staff. Offering child care services across the Inuit Nunangat in Inuktit is a major challenge, the primary issue being access to fluent Inuktit speakers. For example, in Nunatsiavut, only 2 of the 5 licensed day care centres provide services in Inuktit. Training for language instructors is the primary barrier. Fluent speakers tend to be Elders. While Elders could provide language training, compensation is an issue as there is a concern that any payment could negatively impact Old Age Security pensions.

Widespread community infrastructure deficits

Access to adequate infrastructure was a commonly raised issue by respondents from the Inuit Land Claims Organizations. The sufficiency of child care centres (and associated facilities, such as playgrounds) and affordable accommodation for child care workers were oft-cited examples. Some communities in Inuit Nunangat lack any licensed day care facilities. Provision of infrastructure can be complicated by a mix of provincial/territorial and municipal government departments involved in infrastructure planning, construction, maintenance and regulation. There is also not universal recognition among funders that the cost of construction is much higher in Inuit Nunangat than elsewhere in Canada, leading to widespread underfunding.

Regulation of child care centres

Licensing and inspection of child care centres is often based on policies, regulations and guidelines developed in southern Canada. For example, in the ISR, child care centres have historically been using a 2 sink method for meal preparation. In recent years, the GNWT has required a 3 sink method, which is the standard for restaurants. One respondent noted that, since child care centres only cook a single meal (lunch) and may also provide a breakfast of cereal and snacks throughout the day, it was unreasonable to hold child care centres to this standard. Another respondent stated that it was difficult to serve traditional cultural food in child care centres because a license from the territorial government was first required.

Access to specialized professional services

Respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations noted the widespread deficit of professional services to support ELCC across Inuit Nunangat. For example, access to speech therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists was reported to be extremely difficult.

Integrate broader health and social services with ELCC

Some respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations observed that health and social programs and services tend to operate in silos. Integrating these with ELCC was identified as a need, and was viewed as one way to help communities appreciate that ELCC is part of a service continuum, and ensuring the health and safety of parents, not just children, is important (not just about “giving a baby a bottle”). This is particularly important because the cumulative effects of intergenerational trauma of residential and day schools are so widespread among Inuit, many

caregivers may not have been properly nurtured as children themselves, leaving some struggling with parenting today.

Broaden community involvement in ELCC

Some respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations noted that there is not broad awareness of the Inuit ELCC Framework in small communities. Raising awareness of the Inuit ELCC Framework would help communities understand that they have the opportunity to effect change in ELCC.

Relevance: alignment with priorities

The Inuit ELCC Framework is an important foundational document, and has been widely used for advocacy, the strength of which was due to extensive consultation and a strong Inuit submission to the development of the Indigenous ELCC Framework. The Inuit ELCC Framework remains largely reflective of the priorities of Inuit Land Claims Organizations, RIAs and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

Respondents agreed that the Inuit ELCC Framework is generally well aligned with the following priorities of Inuit Land Claims Organizations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Inuit organizations.

Inuvialuit Regional Corporation's prenatal and early childhood programs intended to provide a foundation to raising healthy and confident children to strengthen the communities in the ISR, while simultaneously passing onto future generations Inuvialuit culture, language and traditions. This programming has the following goals and objectives: respect and support families in their task of nurturing children; increase child and family awareness of health practices; offer nutrition to the children and family; and ensure child care programs are based on current knowledge of child development and early childhood education

ELCC needs in Nunavut, as identified by Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated and the 3 Regional Inuit Associations (Kitikmeot Inuit Association, Kivalliq Inuit Association, Qikiqtani Inuit Association) in their submission to the National Indigenous ELCC Framework were adequate funding to run programs, including staff wages, benefits, sufficient food and supplies/resources; resources for Inuit early childhood educational programs; adequate space and facilities for children and staff, both inside and outside; capacity building for early childhood educators, managers and boards of directors in order to achieve quality programs; coordinate and simplify the administration and funding of ELCC programs; at least 1 program in every community; and greater parental and community involvement. The recommendations were to support an Inuit-led ELCC strategy and establishment of a coordinating body; provide adequate funding to run programs in every community based on community needs, including adequate funding for a liveable wage for staff; and provide support for the development of an Inuit or Inuktitut-based early childhood educator learning program and curricula.

Kativik Regional Government's priorities for ELCC in Nunavik as outlined in its submission to the National Indigenous ELCC Framework were resources for Inuit educational programs; support for children with special needs; adequate spaces and facilities for children and staff, both outside and inside; and training across the board, from early childhood educators, centre directors and up to the board of directors. Its recommendations were to create Inuit-specific Early Childhood Development programs including a curriculum which includes Inuit development indicators; provide support to early childhood educators and staff who are caring for children with special

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needs; repair and expand child care space and provide proper facilities, including furniture and playgrounds; and provide training for early childhood educators, staff, pedagogy counsellors and child care centre directors.

The Nunatsiavut Government identified the central priority of growing Inuit culture and language through ELCC programs and child care centres. Its submission to ESDC regarding the National Indigenous ELCC Framework provided four recommendations: support everyone in the community to learn Inuktitut through teaching young kids; support culturally relevant programming, including equipment and materials of cultural relevance; provision of country foods; the ability to go out on the land with kids to gather, hunt, trap and fish; provide sufficient child care space, playgrounds and equipment; and increase capacity and retention of Early Childhood Development staff.

The Inuit ELCC Framework, in both its design and implementation, aligns well with Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's Inuit Nunangat Policy (for instance, section 6 to support Inuit self-determination) and the Strategy and Action Plan 2020 to 2023 (in other words, objective 3 to advance Inuit-specific health and social development policies, programs, and Initiatives). Pauktuutit advocates for the social, cultural, political, and economic betterment of Inuit women, their families, and communities. The priorities of the 2 organizations, identified in their submission to ESDC regarding the National Indigenous ELCC Framework, were:

- develop an Inuit-specific Early Childhood Development curriculum, program, materials and teaching tools that are trauma-informed and grounded in Inuit
- provide capital funds to build new and renovate existing buildings and playgrounds to meet Inuit community needs and health and safety standards in order to provide new spaces/services where needed, as determined by communities
- ensure educators, child care centre managers, Elders, program providers and staff working in early learning and child care receive proper compensation, taking into account the cost of living in the North
- develop and provide quality early childhood educator training programs for early childhood educators grounded in Inuit knowledge as well as ongoing professional development opportunities for ELCC staff and volunteers, and
- facilitate Inuit self-governance of ELCC licensing and regulations for Inuit organizations.

Government of Canada respondents agreed that the Inuit ELCC Framework is aligned with departmental core responsibilities, specifically to support children and families with access to high quality, affordable, and inclusive childcare across Canada, and advancing Indigenous-led priorities with a focus on ELCC, through the co-developed Indigenous ELCC Framework in partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation governments and organizations.

More broadly, the Inuit ELCC Framework and its implementation, aligns with Canada's reconciliation agenda, commitments to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (and the Inuit Specific Calls for Justice), and compliance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. With the Inuit ELCC Framework being underwritten by Inuit self-determination, Government of Canada respondents observed that it is a good example of a government to government relationship with Inuit.

Government of Canada respondents noted the value of the Inuit ELCC as a foundation to develop ELCC based on Inuit needs and perspectives. Updating the Inuit ELCC Framework, particularly in light of the post pandemic reality was suggested, as was the development of a companion

implementation plan to systematically advance the Inuit ELCC Framework, and temper expectations.⁴⁵

Respondents generally observed that the Inuit ELCC Framework is a valuable tool for advocacy, and as it was supported by extensive consultation with Inuit individual, communities, organizations and governments, it remains a pertinent and accurate reflection of the priorities of Inuit regions and Inuit Land Claims Organizations.

Effectiveness: design and delivery

Extent to which Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and its partners have sufficient input into the overall design and delivery of the Indigenous ELCC partnership model

The IELCC Framework was designed to introduce greater Indigenous control over IELCC. The

The new partnership model intended to facilitate Indigenous-led decision-making to advance national and regional priorities was viewed widely as a success, transforming the relationship between Inuit and Canada. Establishing the Inuit National Partnership Table on Early Learning and Child Care was widely supported, and operationally viewed as an extension of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group. Inuit expressed optimism of Canada's openness to Inuit self-determination, of which the Inuit ELCC Framework is a strong example.

primary mechanism for this was a new partnership model to facilitate Indigenous-led decision-making to advance national and regional priorities. Included were national and regional partnership tables with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. These tables are viewed as a key platform for Government of Canada-Indigenous collaboration. They are comprised of regional representatives mandated by Indigenous leaders to work in collaboration with the IELCC Secretariat at ESDC to facilitate Indigenous led planning, priority setting and decision-making to advance priorities in ELCC and promote intersectoral coordination to strengthen collaboration among players in the ELCC sphere.

Respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and other Inuit organizations were highly supportive of the partnership model, describing it as a strong example of how the relationship has been transformed with ESDC, becoming an authentic partnership with better communication and understanding of each other's perspectives. Establishing the INPT (Inuit National Partnership Table) was operationally viewed as an extension of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group. Government of Canada respondents also noted the success of the partnership model, noting that emerging Inuit governance and developing capacity displays the readiness to work through partnership tables to nationally and regionally collaborate with the federal government to advance the Inuit vision for the Inuit ELCC Framework.

The application of the partnership model has, however, not always been consistent. Respondents noted that the new funding to repair and renovate existing Indigenous early learning and child care centres, a Budget 2021 Canada-wide investment (and outside the purview of the IELCC

⁴⁵ In some quarters of the federal government, there was a view that Government of Canada involvement in IELCC would only require short-term funding following devolution of Indigenous governments and organizations. Government of Canada respondents interviewed for this evaluation, however, recognized that federal support for IELCC will be an ongoing requirement.

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Secretariat), was not subject to the Indigenous ELCC partnership model, Indigenous groups were not consulted, and the administrative and reporting requirements remained burdensome.

Extent to which the Inuit ELCC Framework is being delivered effectively

The flexibility of the Inuit ELCC Framework was identified as a strength, enabling Inuit to design, deliver and invest in solutions that respond to their needs and priorities. While full transfer of ELCC to Indigenous communities, organizations and governments remains Canada's ultimate goal, implementation of this policy was based on assumptions that were unrealistic, particularly the time required for and scope of transfer. Implementation of the *Indigenous ELCC* Framework is a major change management exercise.

Respondents from Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Inuit Land Claims Organizations, and other Inuit organizations generally expressed satisfaction with the delivery of the Inuit ELCC Framework. Primary delivery issues related to the Inuit partnership with the federal government in the design and delivery of the Inuit ELCC Framework, and funding levels and funding mechanisms have historically been the main delivery challenges. However, respondents noted substantial positive progress has been made by the Government of Canada in addressing these issues (as described above in the section Extent to which Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and its partners have sufficient input into the overall design and delivery of the Indigenous ELCC partnership model and below in the section Extent to which Indigenous ELCC funding mechanisms have fostered and hindered the design and delivery of Inuit ELCC Framework programs and services).

As noted in this report (the sections Relevance: Alignment with Needs and Relevance: Alignment with Priorities), some respondents stated that delivery of the Inuit ELCC Framework could benefit from the development of an implementation plan, but this has been challenging from a governance perspective (as described in the section Extent to which the Inuit ELCC Framework is being governed effectively).

The flexibility of the Indigenous ELCC Framework, compared to the AHSUNC and FNICCI legacy programs, has not only allowed for Inuit communities, organizations and governments to design ELCC programs that respond to Inuit needs and priorities, but from an investment perspective there is the flexibility to reallocate funding to any Inuit ELCC need and priority, including increasing the operating budgets of head start centres (formerly AHSUNC) and day care centres (formerly FNICCI).

From a Government of Canada perspective, implementation of the Indigenous ELCC Framework is more ambitious and complex than the typical federal horizontal Initiative. ESDC is the federal focal point guiding the Initiative, with ISC and PHAC as co-signatories to the Terms and Conditions. As such, and with the ultimate goal of full transfer, the Indigenous ELCC Framework is a substantial change management exercise. Government of Canada respondents noted that full transfer of ELCC to Indigenous communities, organizations and governments—including design and delivery—remains Canada's ultimate goal. While the Indigenous ELCC policy design is viewed as sound, implementation was predicated on assumptions that are viewed as unrealistic, particularly the time required for, and scope of the transfer.

One reported challenge has been the familiarity of federal officials involved in ELCC with the complex Inuit governance—settled comprehensive land claim agreements in each of the Inuit regions covering about 40% of Canada's landmass, which have the status of protected treaties under section 35 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, and each governed by Inuit Land Claims

Organizations with various powers, some similar to provincial/territorial governments and others where the situation is far more complex.

Extent to which Indigenous ELCC funding mechanisms have fostered and hindered the design and delivery of Inuit ELCC Framework programs and services

The flexibility of the Inuit ELCC Framework was identified as a strength, enabling Inuit to design, deliver and invest in solutions that respond to their needs and priorities. While full transfer of ELCC to Indigenous communities, organizations and governments remains Canada's ultimate goal, implementation of this policy was based on assumptions that were unrealistic, particularly the time required for and scope of transfer. Implementation of the [Indigenous ELCC Framework](#) is a major change management exercise.

Since 2017, the Government of Canada has made substantial investments in Indigenous ELCC, including supplemental investments in mitigation of the effects of COVID to ensure ELCC sites did not close or could reopen safely, that staff were retained, or in cases where sites could not reopen, to support alternative service delivery models (for example, virtual home visits, home learning kits, food baskets). The most recent Fall Economic Statement has ensured Inuit ELCC Framework funding is now permanent.

Implementing Inuit direction in terms of ELCC funding has been one area of success, widely supported by Inuit Land Claims Organizations and Inuit organizations. Multiyear funding allocations have enabled ESDC to operationalize Inuit direction for funding more smoothly over a longer planning horizon and, guided by the Inuit ELCC Framework, where funds should be spent in terms of priority areas. For Inuit recipients, funding now arrives early in the fiscal year, annual incremental increases are clear, and multiyear funding has allowed for long-term planning (for example, to support capital-intensive and longer-term infrastructure development).

A major issue has been delays in confirming IELCC funding for 2023 to 2024 and beyond. Respondents expressed concerns over the time taken by ESDC to confirm these allocations. Much of the time of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group meetings during 2022 to 2023 was devoted to this topic, which meant that priority issues—such as infrastructure and day care governance—were not receiving the required attention. As several Inuit Land Claims Organizations stated, this delay meant that preparation of operational plans for future years also had to be delayed, pending receipt of an official confirmation by Canada of the funding to be provided. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami reported that funding for 2023 to 2024 and beyond has now been confirmed and this information conveyed to Inuit Land Claims Organizations.

Streamlining of ELCC funding was widely reported by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Inuit Land Claims Organizations and other Inuit organizations as a success of the Inuit ELCC Framework. Importantly, by delivering on these commitments, ESDC and Service Canada are now viewed by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Inuit Land Claims Organizations and other Inuit organizations as true partners, listening and making every effort to make improvements.

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While there has been substantial investment in Indigenous ELCC, delivery of this funding has been a challenge. Historically, Government of Canada delivery of funding support to Indigenous organizations and governments has been a perennial issue, and the subject of many Office of the Auditor General of Canada reports. ELCC funding has been no exception. The process to do so is fairly straightforward on paper. Inuit leadership determines ELCC funding allocations, and individual signatories to funding agreements prepare plans for the use of funding. Service Canada is then instructed to transfer funds to recipients. Periodically, recipients provide regular financial and non-financial reporting against the funding agreement. The major challenge has been the funding approach, that is, the historical use of contribution agreements, which force adherence to a project-based management style with the attendant controls, including restrictions on moving funds across budget lines, the requirement for detailed financial and non-financial reporting, and difficulties carrying forward unspent funds from one fiscal year to another.

Early on, Inuit leadership urged the Government of Canada to streamline ELCC funding agreements, to help reduce the administrative burden borne by recipients,⁴⁶ and respect the Inuit right to self-determination. While there are several funding envelopes for legacy programs, Inuit leadership did not want to eliminate these, preferring instead to have an umbrella approach to pool resources and reduce reporting and other administrative requirements. Funding released through Budget 2017, which launched the IELCC Transformation Initiative, was reportedly the impetus for streamlining funding agreements, driven by lobbying from all Indigenous distinction-based groups.

Government of Canada respondents noted that transition to a more unified funding basket that combines all funding sources, including AHSUNC and FNICCI, and delivered through a grant model has been challenging because only CIRNAC has the granting authority. This means federal partners, including ESDC, are required to transfer funds to CIRNAC on an annual basis, and CIRNAC then prepares the grant agreement. To do so, the initial step was co-locating funding streams in a single agreement—but with only a single annual report and one set of financials required from the recipient, which once received by the Government of Canada are then distributed to participating federal funders. The next step is integration of funding streams in a horizontal agreement, as a single IELCC funding line item.

Streamlining ELCC funding has been a clear area of success for what has hitherto been an intractable issue. Streamlined funding agreements have been developed for three Inuit Land Claims Organizations (Table 16). The standalone agreement with Inuvialuit Regional Corporation combined two separate funding agreements, with a single common set of key performance indicators and a single annual plan and report. A single agreement moved into a fiscal funding agreement, the preferred approach for treaty holders, has been used with NG, with funding flowing through the fiscal financing agreement as this Inuit region is self-governing. Beginning in 2021 to 2022, PHAC funding for Kativik Regional Government has flowed through a CIRNAC funding agreement in recognition of self-government status per the James Bay Agreement. Both recipients are required to submit an annual report (which includes an annual plan) and audited financial statements, but these recipients are not required to report against key performance indicators.

While all Inuit governments are well-positioned to move into this more holistic approach to funding, one challenge facing the Government of Canada, as noted in the section Extent the Inuit ELCC Framework is being delivered effectively, has been the familiarity of federal officials involved in ELCC with the four Inuit land claim agreements, the federal authorities and processes to flow

⁴⁶ One Inuit government did report that fulfilling the administrative requirements for ELCC funding has been a useful exercise, introducing a rigorous planning, investment and reporting discipline.

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funding to Inuit regions in relation to these agreements, and approaches to enable intergovernmental collaboration at the federal level and with other spheres of government.

Streamlining of ELCC funding has also had an additional, important benefit. Respondents from

These innovative funding approaches have resulted in a substantial lessening of the administrative and reporting burden faced by Inuit recipients, while providing more latitude for them to use funding as and when they feel is most appropriate. However, other recipients of ELCC funding, such as child care centres, still face considerable administrative burden.

Inuit Land Claims Organizations and Inuit organizations reported a complete shift in the attitude of ESDC and Service Canada employees, who are now behaving as a true partner: listening and, most importantly, delivering on their commitments.

The benefits of the innovative funding approaches have meant a lessening of the administrative and reporting burden faced by recipients, and more latitude for recipients to use funding as and when they feel is most appropriate. Initially, ESDC reportedly faced pushback from the federal system, but federal partners now have a shared understanding of why this approach is beneficial for Inuit recipients and ELCC delivery—so much so that the approach is being offered to other distinctions groups.

Nevertheless, respondents recognize that while the administrative and reporting requirements have been lessened through the streamlining of ELCC funding agreements with IELCC agreement holders, it was reported that child care centres still face considerable burden in this respect. This stems from the fact that each child care centre may have multiple contribution agreements with multiple funding sources, each with its own reporting requirements. ESDC's proposal-driven Quality Improvement Project and the ELCC small projects component under the Enabling Accessibility Fund were also similarly criticized.

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Table 16: Progress in streamlining ELCC funding agreements

Organization	Before streamlining	After streamlining	Funding components in streamlined agreements
Inuvialuit Regional Corporation	<p>Inuvialuit Regional Corporation- Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program Agreement administered by ESDC</p> <p>Inuvialuit Regional Corporation- AHSUNC Agreement administered by PHAC</p>	<p>Inuvialuit Regional Corporation - ELCC Standalone Agreement administered by ESDC</p>	<p>IELCC-FNICCI</p> <p>IELCC-Transformation</p> <p>IELCC-AHSUNC</p>
Kativik Regional Government	<p>Kativik Regional Government - Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program Transitory Agreement administered by ESDC</p>	<p>Kativik Regional Government Grant Agreement administered by CIRNAC (draft as of March 2023)</p>	<p>Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program Core community economic development support</p> <p>IELCC-FNICCI</p> <p>IELCC-Transformation</p> <p>IELCC-AHSUNC</p>

Organization	Before streamlining	After streamlining -	Funding components in streamlined agreements
Nunatsiavut Government	NG Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program Agreement administered by ESDC	NG Fiscal Financing Agreement administered by CIRNAC	Water and wastewater Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program IELCC FNICCI Ventilation Inuit Housing Infrastructure (ICIF) Infrastructure (Collaborative Fiscal Process) First Nation and Inuit Benefits (FNIHB) Non-Insured Health Benefit Enhancement (NIHB)

Extent to which the Inuit ELCC Framework is being governed effectively

Funding to support governance has been provided to Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Inuit Land Claims Organizations and RIAs. The results have been mixed, and funding levels for basic governance appear insufficient. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has proven to be valuable in its advocacy role to the Government of Canada. There is, however, room to improve Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s role as a convener of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group. The opportunity exists for the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group, as a national working group, to be more strategic, providing recommendations to National Inuit Committee on Health and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board to effect upstream systems change at the Inuit Nunangat and regional levels. There are also opportunities to improve collaboration between Inuit Land Claims Organizations and provincial and territorial governments so that the ELCC system is a better reflection of Inuit needs and aspirations.

The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board and National Inuit Committee on Health are widely regarded as helpful structures to help to advance Inuit decision-making and self-determination. Respondents viewed Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s advocacy role as key and reported that Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s effort in this regard has been valuable, with \$63.5 million in federal funding realized since 2017 (including \$8.69 million for partnerships and governance alone). However, some respondents saw an opportunity for Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami to improve its role as a convener of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group (more strategic, less operational).

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As a platform that brings cohesion to the Inuit regions on ELCC and represents the voice of Inuit, the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group model is widely considered a success, as exemplified by the submission made by the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group as part of the Indigenous ELCC Framework engagement process. Today's working group is viewed as a marked improvement over the first iteration, with better representation (including ESDC participation) and capacity. However, it was also noted that the working group is dependent on ILCO capacity and, like any such body, the knowledge, skills and experience of individual members. Although respondents recognized the strong, frontline ELCC expertise of Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group members, there was a view that this has been a double-edged sword, resulting in the working group tending to focus on operational issues at the regional level at the expense of addressing important strategic issues across Inuit Nunangat. This has reportedly led some members to question the value of attending working group meetings if topics of national interest are not being discussed.

As a national working group, there was the view that the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group and its members should instead act as strategic advisors to the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board and National Inuit Committee on Health regarding the development of the IELCC system across Inuit Nunangat, to drive upstream systems change by advancing national Inuit Nunangat policy, priorities and projects, and adopt a centre of expertise function to identify and share best practices. Some respondents suggested, however, that the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group is best positioned to serve as the primary mechanism to develop and manage an Inuit ELCC Framework implementation plan, to regularly review the Inuit ELCC Framework and its progress in implementation, help improve collaboration with system partners, and harness related programs to advance the Inuit ELCC Framework.^{47,48}

The IELCC Secretariat came under scrutiny from some respondents of Inuit Land Claims Organizations and Inuit organizations as not reflecting the Inuit ELCC Framework's principle of self-determination, given the Secretariat has no Inuit staff and no presence in Inuit Nunangat.

⁴⁷ For example, the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group and Inuit Land Claims Organizations could convey their expectations of the IELCC system to the provinces and territories as substantial funders of ELCC, and the IELCC Secretariat at ESDC can facilitate these connections as committed to in the Canada wide agreements.

⁴⁸ For example, to address the widespread early childhood educator supply issues, the Manitoba Métis Federation has been using the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Strategy to develop a pool of Métis early childhood educators. Additionally, the Métis Nation Saskatchewan has launched a Michif immersion program for Métis, introduced Michif in ELCC centres and mainstream schools.

Status of Inuit ELCC Framework performance measurement

Improving ongoing performance measurement of the Inuit ELCC Framework is an urgent priority. A performance measurement framework is a key tool to help clarify and communicate expected program results and targets, and is central to planning and decision making, monitoring and reporting, and accountability. To date, a handful of interim performance indicators were developed by ESDC with no input from Inuit organizations. It is recognized that these indicators now need to be revisited so that more information is available on the progress being made in achieving the intended outcomes of the Indigenous ELCC Framework.

Performance measurement is a particular concern, as widely recognized by many respondents interviewed for this evaluation. To meet Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada accountability requirements to understand if Indigenous ELCC Framework expenditures are having the desired impact, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami agreed to report against 8 performance indicators developed by ESDC without Inuit involvement. Reporting against these indicators was viewed as an interim measure until a more comprehensive performance measurement framework could be developed. ESDC's intent is to codevelop separate performance measurement frameworks with each of the Indigenous distinction groups. Treasury Board Secretariat requires this to be completed by March 2025.

In developing interim ELCC indicators, the aim was to select indicators based on the data already being collected by ISC (FNICCI) and PHAC (AHSUNC) without introducing any new reporting burden on recipients. However, differences in the data collected by ISC and PHAC makes direct comparisons across AHSUNC and FNICCI difficult. For example, the interim indicator, "number of child care spaces available" is tracked by AHSUNC but cannot be reported by FNICCI because only the number of children being served is tracked. Similarly, the interim indicator number of children on waitlists is only relevant to AHSUNC. This means the information collected related to these interim indicators has very limited use for accountability or even a rudimentary understanding of whether Indigenous ELCC funding is having the desired impact.

Availability of information and data to support decision-making and accountability is an opportunity for improvement. Funding agreements, proposals, plans and financial and non-financial reports were not readily available from ESDC, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami or Inuit Land Claims Organizations to support this evaluation. Streamlined funding agreements and a move to multi-year agreements and to some grants means that reporting requirements have been lessened or even largely eliminated. Of the eight Inuit funding recipients, only three provided some information on some of the interim indicators. Capacity is a contributing factor to the state of monitoring and reporting.

Reporting against the 8 interim ELCC performance indicators has been a challenge. Of the 8 Inuit organizations in receipt of Inuit ELCC Framework funding, only 3 have provided data to ESDC. There are several reasons for this. The annual reports from some funded recipients only provide descriptive information about completed ELCC activities. Other funding agreements are based on a five-year cycle without any requirement for annual reporting, while grant-based funding agreements by design only require minimal reporting.

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The evaluation team encountered substantial challenges obtaining financial and non-financial information about the initiatives being funded across Inuit Nunangat, so it was not possible to develop a full picture of what was planned, what was accomplished, the impacts, and the funds spent. There is an opportunity to ensure that the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group has the information required (for example, the impacts of the Inuit ELCC Framework) to support its role as a strategic advisory body to the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board and National Inuit Committee on Health, and to drive upstream systems change.

ESDC respondents noted that improvements to data collection are planned for the Indigenous ELCC Framework (for example, new reporting templates), but investments in monitoring and learning are required, as well as for data stewardship. Respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations and other Inuit organizations also identified internal capacity as a challenge in this respect.

Since agreement holders submit reports directly to the Government of Canada, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has no visibility of Inuit ELCC data, which undermines Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's primary function to advocate for and support Inuit regions. On a positive note, Inuit Land Claims Organizations did not report issues with the information availability to support decision-making, and agreement holders are tracking the information they feel is required. An opportunity for improvement suggested by several Inuit and Government of Canada respondents was the need to collect information to demonstrate the impacts of the Inuit ELCC Framework.

ESDC noted that co-development of a performance measurement framework for the Inuit ELCC Framework is a priority. This will require a plan and costing for the collection, storage, analysis and reporting of related data. Once in place, this should address many of the shortcomings noted above, but only if adequate capacity is established and maintained.

An issue facing the evaluation was the availability of information from agreement holders to be able to compare actual with planned activities and spending. The largely anecdotal evidence indicates that progress is uneven across Inuit Nunangat, with much work still to be done. This comes as no surprise given the Framework represents a transformative shift in the design, development and delivery of ELCC programs for Inuit, and the first few years of implementation have been seriously impacted by COVID.

Effectiveness: Progress on Activities and Outputs

The progress achieved in each of the Inuit regions regarding the implementation of planned activities during the first years of the Inuit ELCC Framework is presented below with the main implementation challenges and lessons learned. As noted in the section “Status of Inuit ELCC Framework performance measurement”, this evaluation was hindered by the lack of financial and non-financial information to develop even a basic picture of the initiatives being funded across Inuit Nunangat, what was planned, what has been accomplished, the planned investments and the funds spent, and their impact.

Inuvialuit Regional Corporation

The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation offers a range of ELCC programs and services through the Indigenous ELCC Initiative (which includes FNICCI and Inuit ELCC). Supported activities include: salaries and related costs to provide full and partial funding for child care centre employees; annual and monthly costs to operate buildings; training to increase the capacity of staff, to improve their skills, to provide all-inclusive services to the children and parents who access the program; office supplies, furniture, program materials for daily programs; purchase of a prefabricated building; assistance to urban Inuit with child care costs; and, operating costs for the Children First Society.

Inuvialuit Regional Corporation also offers early education programs through AHSUNC. Supported activities include salaries and related costs for AHS employees, annual and monthly costs to operate the building, and program materials, office and nutritional supplies.

Inuvialuit Regional Corporation’s ELCC partnership and governance activities include: engaging speech and language and occupational therapists, specifically to provide travel costs for specialists to provide staff with training in developing children’s language, fine motor and development skills; costs for annual maintenance of technology at Inuvialuit Regional Corporation’s child care centres; and, support for the evaluation of ELCC programs, specifically related to travel costs.

Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated

Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated leads the Inuit ELCC work in Nunavut. It coordinates its efforts with the territorial and regional Inuit organizations along with stakeholders including the GN’s ELCC division, Nunavut Arctic College, and regional economic development organizations. Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated is the chair of the Inunnguiniqumut Committee, a working group of these organizations to coordinate and align IELCC activity in Nunavut. Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated has a staff position for an Early Childhood Wellness Policy Advisor in the Department of Social and Cultural Development.

Kakivak Association

KA is a Community Economic Development Organization situated in Iqaluit serving 13 communities in the Qikiqtani (Baffin) region. There are currently 27 day care centres funded by Kakivak, with 196 staff, providing 626 licensed spaces (498 pre-school and toddler, and 128 infant spaces).

Prior to the introduction of IELCC funding, Kakivak received FNICCI funding for over 20 years (\$1.5 million annually). This funding was used to subsidize the daily cost of day care for parents, provide wage subsidies to day care staff, and provide operation and maintenance funding to the centres. With the addition of IELCC funding beginning in 2018 to 2019 (\$2.7 million annually), Kakivak has been able to support renovations to the day care in Arctic Bay which had been closed for several years.

The number of child care centres supported by Kakivak has increased over the years, as has the number of child care spaces and child care workers (although quantitative data on these measures was not provided in annual reports). Kakivak has also been able to provide new services to child care centres, including technical support (for example, bookkeeping services).

There remains an urgent need for additional ELCC capacity, both for new centres and more spaces, with widespread shortages of early childhood educators. Some communities lack licensed child care centres, resulting in over 1,000 children on the waitlist across the region. One factor inhibiting the construction of new child care centres has been the need for communities to drive the process, including applying for funding, and the basic lack of capacity to do so. In terms of the supply of early childhood educators, Nunavut Arctic College provides early childhood educator education, but there is a need for the college to increase its capacity to do so.

With the introduction of \$10 a day day care in 2022 by the GN, Kakivak plans to reallocate funding previously used for subsidizing parents to meet other urgent child care needs. Kakivak also has transferred funding to the Qikiqtani Inuit Association to support the Ipitiki Program, which provides family literacy programming and governance training for day care board members. Qikiqtani Inuit Association reported that the governance training was well received in communities. While this training was provided prior the pandemic, it had to be suspended.

Kitikmeot Inuit Association

Kitikmeot Inuit Association represents the Inuit people of the Kitikmeot region of Nunavut. The association's goal is to support Kitikmeot Inuit, providing them with more educational, employment and business opportunities. One of its Inuit ELCC Framework objectives is to achieve an increase in access to culturally-appropriate Inuit ELCC and family wellness programs in the region. Kitikmeot Inuit Association reported that it has started work on this objective, but it has been difficult to carry out discussions with local organizations during the pandemic, even during late 2022 when the pandemic had subsided. The number of licensed child care spaces has not yet increased. Work on developing a language curriculum and tools also had not begun. Some training has been carried out, including board governance training. Some of the short-term priorities are to engage with communities to prioritize ELCC needs; increase the use of day care spaces by assisting centres to promote their services in the community; increasing staff retention by increasing wages by \$2 an hour; increasing annual staff training; and improving culturally and developmentally appropriate ELCC programs.

KIA has experienced a variety of challenges, including obtaining commitment and interest from community groups; issues associated with early childhood educators, including a lack of supply of qualified instructors, insufficient training opportunities and insufficient wages; and parents not interested in getting involved as board members of day care centres. Affordability has been a

longstanding issue but should be addressed by the introduction of \$10/d day care in Nunavut in 2023.

Kivalliq Inuit Association

Kivalliq Inuit Association represents the interests of all Inuit living in the Kivalliq Region, acts as a lobbying group, and administers and monitors certain provisions of the Nunavut Final Agreement in the region.

Kativik Regional Government

Kativik Regional Government is the representative regional authority for most of the Nunavik region of Quebec, including all of the territory north of the 55th parallel. There are 14 northern villages, and each community has 1 licensed child care centre.⁴⁹ Kativik Regional Government is financed by Quebec (50%) and the Government of Canada (25%). Its mandate includes providing a wide variety of services, including child care. The Sustainable Employment Department is responsible for child care services, which includes regulating child care centres. The majority of funding for child care services is provided by Quebec.

In 2022, Kativik Regional Government introduced a new salary scale for child care workers, consisting of an increase in regular salary and the introduction of adjustments for cargo and cost-of-living. Each child care worker also receives a \$5,000 employee benefit at the end of each year. Quebec provides funds for child care salaries, and Inuit ELCC Framework funding provides a top-up for the cargo and cost-of-living components. In terms of recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, the impact of this salary adjustment is yet to be felt in Nunavik.

A total of 93 new child care spaces will be in place in Kuujuaq in 2023 and 2024. Funding for construction was provided by Quebec.

Inuit ELCC Framework funding is being used for the inspection of child care centres and playgrounds. These will determine the need for new capital construction and renovations.

Kativik Regional Government has recently launched a new child care curriculum, funded by AHSUNC.

Nunatsiavut Government

Nunatsiavut encompasses all lands in the Labrador Inuit Settlement Area, including the communities of Nain, Hopedale, Rigolet, Makkovik and Postville. There are 5 licensed day care centres. The Department of Health and Social Development is responsible for the IELCC-funded programs.

As part of the development of the Inuit ELCC Framework, NG identified several goals for ELCC, including increasing the capacity and retention of early childhood educators, improving child care centre facilities (for example, improved space configurations, new playground equipment), and support of language preservation and cultural programming. Progress is being made on several fronts, but needs remain, as follows.

While there are currently a total of 40 staff across the 5 child care centres, recruitment of early childhood educators continues to be a challenge. To help address this, a new wage grid for early childhood educators was announced in January 2023. During 2020, training was provided to 20 early childhood educators (early childhood educator Credential Levels 1 and 2) in partnership with the College of the North Atlantic. The number of licensed child care spaces has increased to 123,

⁴⁹ A map of the 14 child care facilities is available at: <https://www.nunavikchildcare.ca/en/child-care-centres>.

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although there continues to be a waitlist. There is an urgent need for an infant care program (up to age 18 months) in Nunatsiavut. While year round day care was introduced in 2022, 4 of the 5 centres still remain closed during the summer months. Increasingly, Inuit are moving from the smaller communities to Happy Valley-Goose Bay, which is outside the settlement area, and there is also a need to provide child care services to urban Inuit.

Infrastructure improvements (new playground facilities) have occurred at two of the child care centres in Rigolet and Postville. The case study of the Pigutsavik Child Care Centre in Nain found that the centre lacks sufficient capacity in its preschool room (ages 3 to 5 years) and looks forward to receiving new playground equipment.

Nunatsiavut's child care staff are interested in receiving cultural training and additional cultural resources. Fluency in Inuktitut in the child care centres is an issue, as only 2 of the 5 centres have this capacity.

Finally, there is a need for additional capacity at the regional level (in the Department of Health and Social Development) to provide day to day supervision of the centres.

Effectiveness: progress on outcomes⁵⁰

Impact on access

Access, measured by number of available child care spaces, remains insufficient. In some communities there are substantial waiting lists, while in others community needs are reportedly being met. There is also a widespread recognition that the ELCC needs of urban Inuit children and families are not being met. It is too early in the lifespan of the Framework to expect to see a significant increase in the number of child care spaces, and the pandemic paused community efforts to improve ELCC facilities and programs. Going forward, it will be important for data to be collected from all communities and child care centres on relevant access indicators, so that the Government of Canada, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Inuit Land Claims Organizations and other Inuit organizations can monitor and report on progress.

As part of the Canada-wide ELCC system improvements the Government of Canada has a target of 250,000 new child care spaces across the country by March 2026. One of the objectives of the Inuit ELCC Framework is to improve the quality and accessibility of ELCC, with an emphasis on cultural and language content. Regarding access, 1 of the interim performance indicators is the number of child care spaces available. Respondents emphasized that increasing the number of child care spaces is not sufficient; these spaces need to be in healthy and safe environments, providing culturally relevant instruction to children.

It is too early in the lifespan of the Framework to expect to see a significant increase in the number of child care spaces, given the time required to do needs assessments in communities and the planning required for new construction. Furthermore, as explained in the section Impact of the

⁵⁰ Since the performance framework is still to be developed for Inuit ELCC Framework, which is only planned for completion by March 31, 2025, proxy outcomes were required in the interim. This evaluation looked at the impact of the Framework on building an accessible, affordable, quality, and inclusive Inuit child care system. These are the stated goals of the federal government's work with provincial, territorial and Indigenous partners to create a Canada wide ELCC system.

COVID-19 Pandemic, the pandemic put a pause on the efforts of communities to improve ELCC facilities.

However, aggregated data was not available to the evaluation to construct a baseline for various access measures, such as number of child care spaces, number of children on waitlists or number of children accessing ELCC services. This was hampered by the lack of plans from Inuit Land Claims Organizations and Inuit organizations to track access indicators against a baseline.

There is anecdotal evidence that some progress has been made in meeting the needs of Inuit communities, but respondents stated that many Inuit communities continue to have urgent child care needs. Respondents from some Inuit Land Claims Organizations reported that the number of child care spaces remain insufficient. Many communities have lengthy waiting lists for child care (for example, over 1,000 in 1 area) due to insufficient capacity (for example, available child care workers), with some communities having no licensed child care facilities. In other communities, access needs are being met. There is, however, a widespread recognition that the ELCC needs of urban Inuit children and families are not being met (consult the section Relevance: Alignment with Needs).

These respondents generally agreed that Inuit Land Claims Organizations would be in a better position to report on the impact of the Inuit ELCC Framework on the various access measures, as further improvements to the Inuit ELCC system are made.

Impact on affordability

ELCC spaces have been historically subsidized in some Inuit regions for many years, with very

Child care is generally viewed as affordable for Inuit families. Child care fees have historically been subsidized in some Inuit regions for many years. As part of the Canada-wide ELCC system improvements, most provinces and territories have either announced child care fee reductions or have already achieved an average cost of \$10 a day or lower for licensed child care. The introduction of \$10 a day daycare across Inuit Nunangat is a major achievement in terms of making child care affordable for Inuit families.

low or even no out of pocket fees for parents. For example, day care has been affordable for parents in Nunatsiavut for many years due to a provincial subsidy. Similarly, Kakivak has administered a parental subsidy program in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut since the late 1990s, funded by the FNICCI program.

Working with provinces, territories and Indigenous partners, affordable child care is a key part of the federal government's plan to transform the ELCC system across Canada. Most provinces and territories have either announced child care fee reductions or have already achieved an average cost of \$10/day or lower for licensed child care. The introduction of \$10/day care across Inuit Nunangat is a major achievement in terms of making child care affordable for Inuit families.

Impact on quality

While federal funding to help improve Inuit ELCC has been welcomed, ESDC's proposal driven Quality Improvement Project was criticized because it is working counter to the streamlining of ELCC funding agreements to help reduce reporting and other administrative requirements, and development of multi-year funding to enable long-term planning. There have been efforts to improve access to child care professional development, training and education, address issues with recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, and develop culturally appropriate Inuit-specific curricula, but much remains to be accomplished.

The quality of the Inuit ELCC system looks at the professional development, training and education supports available for child care workers, the development and implementation of evidence-based quality frameworks, standards and tools, and the development and implementation of a wage grid for early childhood educators. Data was not available to establish whether the quality of Inuit ELCC, at the system-level, had improved as a result of the Inuit ELCC Framework.

Over the evaluation period, ESDC's Quality Improvement Project was initiated to provide proposal-based funding to help develop and promote best practices or innovative models in Indigenous ELCC programs. Proposals were considered from Indigenous communities, governments and organizations exploring ways to improve Indigenous ELCC. The funding limit is \$2 million with a project duration of up to 36 months. A single call for proposal was held during 2020 to 2021, and another has been launched for 2022 to 2023. The Quality Improvement Project supports many aspects of ELCC quality including governance, performance measurement, education and training, licensing rules and procedures, and making tools and training for IELCC staff working with children with special needs. This proposal based Project came under criticism from Inuit respondents because it is working counter to the streamlining of ELCC funding agreements to help reduce reporting and other administrative requirements, and development of multiyear funding to enable long term planning. The Early Learning and Child Care small projects component under the Enabling Accessibility Fund also faced similar criticism.

As noted in the section Relevance: Alignment with Needs, AC, Nunavut Arctic College and College of the North Atlantic offer early childhood educator diploma and certificate programs, as well as individual courses, and programming is designed to be flexible and accessible. While there have been efforts to make child care professional development, training and education available to those interested, barriers to access remain.

To assist with the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators some regions have implemented new wage grids, as has recently been announced by the Nunatsiavut Government (consult the section Effectiveness: Progress on Activities and Outputs), and similarly so by Kativik Regional Government in Nunavik.

Licensing and inspection of the child care centres remains an issue in some Inuit regions. For example, this is the case in the ISR where child care centres are being held to a health and safety standard which does not reflect the operating context or are sensitive to cultural needs (consult the section Relevance: Alignment with Needs).

Other aspects of quality, such as access to culturally appropriate Inuit-specific curricula and Inuktitut speakers have reportedly seen some improvement over the evaluation period. A primary barrier, however, is access to fluent Inuktitut speakers, the majority whom are Elders, and access to training for language instructors (consult the section Relevance: Alignment with Needs).

Impact on inclusivity

Inclusivity, specifically aspects related to physical, psychological, and developmental abilities, was not a commonly raised. Inuit regions address diversity more broadly. Most child care centres across Inuit Nunangat have specific policies to prioritize families that are being supported by the child protection system. This is one example of policies and procedures that provide specific priorities for child care enrollment. In Inuit Nunangat, non-Indigenous children can attend ELCC which helps to contribute to a culturally diverse environment.

Inclusivity in ELCC is intended to take into consideration and build on the diversity of children and families, creating ELCC programs that include a range of supports to respond to children's, families' and communities' diverse abilities, geographic locations and socio-economic circumstances. One respondent noted, however, that the definition of inclusivity is evergreen, and now about ensuring that all children and families have access to universal early childhood education.

Inclusivity, specifically aspects related to physical, psychological and developmental abilities, was not an issue raised by respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations or other Inuit organizations. Government of Canada respondents noted that this aspect of inclusivity was heard less frequently from Inuit as compared to First Nations—attributed by these respondents to the smaller size of Inuit communities.

Diversity is, however, a consideration in all Inuit regions. One respondent noted that the majority of child care centres across Inuit Nunangat have specific policies to prioritize families that are being supported by the child protection system. This is one example of policies and procedures that child care centres have that may provide specific priorities for child care enrollment.

Across Inuit Nunangat, non-Inuit children can attend ELCC programs, which helps to contribute to a culturally diverse environment.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID had a major impact on the provision of ELCC services across Inuit Nunangat, and most child care centres had to shut down for several months. [Indigenous ELCC](#) agreement holders and child care centres were able to quickly pivot and demonstrated real innovation in supporting children and families during this period. Supplemental Government of Canada pandemic emergency funding and flexibility in administering existing ELCC contribution agreements was a key support. While child care centres have generally returned to normal operations as of early 2023, some respondents noted that the involvement of communities in ELCC has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

COVID had, of course, a major impact on the provision of ELCC services across Inuit Nunangat. Most child care centres had to shut down during the pandemic for several months. However, IELCC agreement holders and child care centres quickly pivoted to provide child care services to the home. Federal government COVID emergency funding helped to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and ensure ELCC sites did not close or could reopen safely, that staff were retained, or in cases where sites could not reopen, to support alternative service delivery models.

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Respondents emphasized that child care centres were able to pivot quickly and showed real innovation. For example, designing and delivering home child care kits. ESDC also provided flexibility in administering ELCC contribution agreements so that funds could be diverted to pressing needs, such as purchasing vehicles to permit home delivery of child care resources. Some Inuit organizations (for example, KA) provided premium pay to early childhood educators who worked during closures. The pandemic did highlight serious issues with infrastructure, such as poor ventilation in child care spaces. COVID emergency funding was used to purchase air purifiers in child care centres.

Since COVID, some child care centres have generally returned to normal operations, but others have not, and some have even had to close. Many child care centres are short-staffed, facing widespread staffing challenges, and competition from other employers offering more competitive compensation packages (for example, territorial governments).

Some respondents from Inuit Land Claims Organizations also noted that when child care centres began to reopen, parents were cautious in terms of allowing their children to return, and that community involvement in ELCC has not returned to pre-pandemic levels (for example, volunteering).

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Relevance: alignment with needs and priorities

The Inuit ELCC Framework is viewed as aspirational, expressing clear expectations and objectives, and is adaptable and flexible. As such, the Inuit ELCC Framework is as relevant today as it was when it was developed and will continue to be so in the future. Its relevance will only increase as ELCC becomes more prominent in terms of level of investment and effort that is underway by federal, provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments to establish a comprehensive ELCC system in Canada.

The Inuit ELCC Framework is viewed as an accurate expression of the needs of Inuit children, families, and communities in Inuit regions and urban centres outside Inuit Nunangat. It also remains largely reflective of the priorities of Inuit Land Claims Organizations, RIAs and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. This is largely due to extensive consultation and a strong Inuit submission to the development of the Indigenous ELCC Framework.

The Inuit ELCC Framework is an important foundational document and has been widely used for advocacy. For the Government of Canada, the Inuit ELCC Framework serves as a guide for federal policy, has been endorsed by Cabinet and at the highest level of the government, is consistent with the Inuit Nunangat Policy, and is directly shaping the implementation of the Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative supporting the implementation of the Indigenous ELCC Framework. It is also being recognized more broadly as a useful guide for the provinces and territories.

The Inuit ELCC Framework, reflecting a pre-COVID context, will eventually benefit from an update later in the Framework's 10 year funding cycle. An implementation plan, consisting of specific actions at the Inuit Nunangat level, will help guide concerted action to effect upstream systems change. Supporting the needs of Inuit children and families residing outside Inuit Nunangat (Priority 8 of the Framework) is a pressing need that could benefit from national attention.

Effectiveness: design, delivery and governance

Inuit expressed optimism regarding Canada's openness to Inuit self-determination. The Inuit ELCC Framework and the supporting partnership model, including the Inuit National Partnership Table on Early Learning and Child Care, has successfully facilitated Inuit-led decision-making to advance national and regional priorities with the Government of Canada. This has transformed the formerly adversarial relationship to a truly interest-based partnership between Inuit and Canada.

Full transfer of ELCC to Indigenous communities, organizations and governments remains Canada's stated ultimate goal; however, Government of Canada implementation of this policy was predicated on assumptions that were unrealistic, particularly the time required for, and scope of the transfer, without full appreciation of the breadth of this major change management exercise. Nevertheless, in the interim, the flexibility of the Inuit ELCC Framework has enabled Inuit to design, deliver and invest in solutions that respond to their needs and priorities. This also provides the opportunity for Inuit and Canada to implement solutions to address operational issues, such as governance and accountability, prior to full transfer of ELCC.

Major strides have been made in reducing the administrative and reporting burden faced by Inuit agreement holders, providing certainty over long term funding, and providing the latitude for Inuit to use funding as and when they feel is most appropriate. Permanent Inuit ELCC Framework funding with a 10 year agreement accompanied by the streamlining of ELCC funding approaches,

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provides the certainty to enable Inuit agreement holders to plan over the long-term. Delivering on these commitments has meant the federal government is regarded as a true partner by Inuit.

Despite the newly available resources for IELCC, and some localized successes, upstream systems change has not been realized. This is to be expected, given the lengthy time required to implement the necessary improvements and see the impacts. Most of the needs expressed in the Inuit ELCC Framework remain, with funding and capacity the primary challenge. Recruitment and retention of staff for frontline, administration and management roles remains a perennial issue across Inuit Nunangat. Some progress is being made in increasing salaries and benefits for early childhood educators, but in the post-COVID context many child care centres are experiencing staffing challenges, with other employers offering more competitive compensation packages, and some centres have had to close. Hiring and retaining early childhood educators is a well-known challenge reported by child care centres across Inuit Nunangat, and indeed, across Canada. While there have been efforts to make child care professional development, training and education available to those interested individuals, widespread barriers to access remain. Access to culturally appropriate, Inuit-specific curricula continues to be held back by the scarcity of fluent Inuktitut speakers and lack of training for language instructors. Widespread community infrastructure deficits also remain, particularly the sufficiency of child care centres (and associated facilities, such as playgrounds) and accommodations for child care workers. These issues are being experienced across Inuit Nunangat and are deserving of continuing national action.

As noted above, supporting the needs of Inuit children and families residing outside Inuit Nunangat by funding Inuit centred ELCC programs and family resource centres in urban areas is a pressing need (Priority 8 of the Framework). Respondents noted that the trend of Inuit moving from small communities to larger urban areas outside of Inuit Nunangat is accelerating. Indeed, Statistics Canada reported that 15.3% of Inuit lived in a large urban centre in 2021, up from 13% in 2016.⁵¹ While the Inuit Land Claims Organizations have started on developing a plan to support urban Inuit, respondents stated that it has been difficult for this priority to gain traction. One of the issues is that there are few designated representatives for the needs of urban Inuit, with the exception of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Pauktuutit. This is an issue deserving of focussed action on the part of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group.

Effectiveness: performance measurement

Other than anecdotally, it was not possible to rigorously determine if Inuit ELCC Framework expenditures are affecting upstream systems change and having the desired impact on meeting the needs of Inuit children, families and communities. The availability of information and data to support decision making and accountability, development of an Inuit ELCC performance measurement framework, and an implementation plan to guide upstream systems change are opportunities for improvement. This will ensure the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group has the tools and evidence to support its role as a strategic advisory body to the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board and National Inuit Committee on Health, and to drive upstream systems change.

Capacity is a contributing factor to the state of monitoring and reporting. A stable performance framework to further clarify interests, expectations and results expressed in the Inuit ELCC Framework—and importantly help to characterize the ELCC system in detail—would be an advantage—as would investment in monitoring and learning and data stewardship. With

⁵¹ Statistics Canada, Indigenous population continues to grow and is much younger than the non-Indigenous population, although the pace of growth has slowed (September 21, 2022).

governance, these are areas that could benefit from Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group attention as a matter of priority.

Effectiveness: progress on activities, outputs and outcomes

The Inuit ELCC Framework represents a transformative shift in the design, development and delivery of ELCC programs for Inuit. Given this, and that the first few years of implementation were seriously impacted by COVID, it comes as no surprise that the largely anecdotal evidence indicates progress is uneven across Inuit Nunangat, with much still to be done. What COVID did reveal is the strong integrity of the ELCC system across Inuit Nunangat, due to the quick response and real innovation of agreement holders in supporting children and families during this period, underwritten by federal government emergency investment.

Access, as measured by number of available child care spaces, remains insufficient, and it is too early in the lifespan of the Framework to expect to see a significant increase in the number of child care spaces, particularly as the pandemic paused community efforts to improve ELCC facilities and programs.

Affordability has been a major achievement, and child care is generally viewed as affordable for Inuit families, with fees historically subsidized in some Inuit regions for many years and recently with the introduction of \$10 a day daycare across Inuit Nunangat.

There have been efforts to improve the quality of child care, through professional development, training and education, improving recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, and developing culturally appropriate Inuit specific curricula, but much remains to be accomplished.

Inclusivity has been a consideration in all Inuit regions, with the majority of child care centres across Inuit Nunangat guided by policies and procedures that provide specific priorities for child care enrollment. However, universal early childhood education remains a need. Across Inuit Nunangat, non-Inuit children can attend ELCC programs, which helps to contribute to a culturally diverse environment.

As system wide improvements to ELCC are made, and sufficient time elapses for their impact to be felt, it can be expected that there will be further improvements to access, affordability, quality, and inclusivity. Going forward, as noted above, it will be important to tighten performance measurement and data stewardship so that the Government of Canada, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Inuit Land Claims Organizations and other Inuit organizations—and the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group—can together monitor progress, learn and improve.

Recommendations

The findings and conclusions from this mid-term evaluation have led to the following recommendations reflecting areas for improvement to the implementation of the Inuit ELCC Framework. These recommendations are intended to help support the Framework as it moves from the first few years of growth into more of a steady-state—building on what has worked, learning from what has not, and ensuring that there is a solid footing to make progress in the provision of Inuit ELCC in the years to come.

Recommendation 1: Provide the required support to the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group to transition from an operational to a more strategic body

The opportunity exists for the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group, as a national working group, to become more strategic and less operational, providing strategic recommendations to National Inuit Committee on Health and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board, and so advance upstream systems change. To do so, it is recommended that the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group focus primarily on advancing the goals and priorities expressed in the Inuit ELCC Framework, through specific actions at the national level, that will impact systems change. This includes developing and coordinating an action plan, as described in Recommendation 2. It is also recommended that the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group identify a common set of Inuit ELCC indicators, in part described in Recommendation 4, at the Inuit Nunangat level—supported by regional reporting—and by monitoring these, identify common performance gaps against which national actions can be designed and investments made. The role of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami as a convener of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group is critical in this respect, and it is recommended that Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami better facilitate strategic discussions and provide more intentional support to working group members to be change makers.

Recommendation 2: Establish an action plan to advance Framework priorities and goals through specific actions at the national level with clear accountabilities, and a process to track and report on progress, and act on any shortfalls

It is recommended that the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group should develop an accompanying implementation plan for the Inuit ELCC Framework, describing the specific actions to advance the Framework goals and priorities, particularly those that will impact upstream systems change. There will likely be substantial overlap with the characterization of the Inuit ELCC system described in Recommendation 5, work which will provide information required to develop a realistic and focussed plan. Actions described in the plan should include clear accountabilities, and a process to monitor and report on progress, and act on any shortfalls.

Recommendation 3: Develop a comprehensive Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan for the Framework

The Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group is recommended to take immediate steps to develop a performance measurement framework for the Inuit ELCC Framework in the form of a comprehensive Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan. This work should recognize that a performance framework is primarily a planning tool to improve decision making, targeting of investments, and learning and improvement, and so requires meaningful indicators that remain stable against which clear targets can be developed, with associated data readily available for

program management. It is recommended that this work be conducted by the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group and managed by National Inuit Committee on Health as required, with ESDC as observers.

Recommendation 4: Improve data stewardship of the Framework to ensure that the information required by decision makers is readily available

Action is recommended to help improve the availability of financial and non financial information about the ELCC Initiatives being funded across Inuit Nunangat, to develop a full picture of what was planned, what was accomplished, the impacts, and the funds spent. This is critical to ensure that the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group has the information required to support its role as a strategic advisory body to the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board and National Inuit Committee on Health, and to drive upstream systems change, and support program improvement by and accountability of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Inuit Land Claims Organizations, other Inuit organizations and the Government of Canada. As this is outside the remit and capacity of the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group, it is recommended that Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and ESDC be given the responsibility to address this recommendation, with regular reporting back to the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group.

Recommendation 5: Build on the Universal Feasibility Study to fully describe the Inuit ELCC system in detail, including the expected upstream system changes, and the desired end state in terms of human resources, facilities, equipment, programs and services, partnerships and collaborations, and governance

Characterization of the Inuit Nunangat ELCC system, in sufficient detail, will help to focus where the efforts and investments of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Inuit Land Claims Organizations, other Inuit organizations and the Government of Canada are most needed and beneficial—at the community, regional and national level—to systematically impact upstream systems change. It is recommended that by building on the Universal Feasibility Study, the Inuit ELCC system be comprehensively described across Inuit Nunangat, within individual regions and at the community level, including the current state and the ideal system that will meet the needs of Inuit children, families and communities. A capacity approach is recommended to understand system requirements for human resources, facilities, equipment, programs and services, partnerships and collaborations, and governance. This will provide a clear baseline from which to prioritize Inuit ELCC system gaps for action, to plan and direct investments to close priority system gaps, and to monitor the improvement of the Inuit ELCC system.

Recommendation 6: Build on best practices of Inuit ELCC agreement holders, scale them, and benefit from lessons learned

Building on best practices and scaling them is essential for continuous improvement of the Inuit ELCC Framework. Similarly, benefiting from lessons learned is important to help identify areas for improvement. Examples of best practices that could be scaled include the deployment of an instructor from the College of the North Atlantic to provide on site early childhood educator training, while another is the development of pay scales and more competitive compensation packages to help improve early childhood educator recruitment and retention. Important lessons learned include those revealed through the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the importance of preparedness and the need for agile responses to unexpected events, providing ideas for specific actions that could help to better respond to future crises. It is recommended that Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group establish a process and the necessary resources to systematically identifying successful practices and expand their use across Inuit Nunangat, and identify lessons learned, to improve the overall effectiveness of Inuit ELCC.